

MAKE IT PLAIN, PREACHA': AFRICAN AMERICAN RHETORICAL LICENSE,

AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH (AAVE),

AND A MODERN RENDERING OF

EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC

by

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ABSTRACT

'MAKE IT PLAIN, PREACHA': AFRICAN AMERICAN RHETORICAL LICENSE,
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In this project, I contend that African American rhetoric, namely African American *sermonic* rhetoric, constitutes a distinct, culturally specialized variety of rhetoric generated out of the distinctive circumstances of the African American Diasporic experience. I present the study of African American homiletics as a lens

through which to view the intersections between culture and aural text. In order to examine the rhetorical tools peculiar to the African American religious tradition. I perform a solely rhetorical explication of many of the typical elements of Black Church sermons. To allow for this process, I have conducted archival research in order to generate transcribed Black Church sermons for the purpose of explicating the rhetorical and paralinguistic components therein. I also argue that the strategic use of AAVE within Black Church sermons serves a hermeneutical function. That is to say, the preacher's choice to deploy AAVE within Black Church sermons not only fosters solidarity between Black speakers and Black congregation, but aids in "meaning-making" on the part of the congregation as well as the process of Biblical exegesis.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Significance

Mainstream America's exposure to the cultural mores and ethnically specific discursive modes practiced within the Black Church has largely been limited to sound bites and short, uncontextualized material delivered by the media. These cursory depictions often promote a distorted, erroneously typified conception of the conventions of the Black Church and the sermonic rhetoric disseminated therein. According to Ronald B. Neal, author of the article "R.I.P: The Myth of the Black Church"

most Americans are largely unaware of the diverse Christian congregations and denominational structures that comprise what is called the Black Church. For many Americans, the oratory, quasi-liberal politics, and charismatic swagger of Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, Jesse L. Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Tavis Smiley are the primary windows into Christianity in [B]lack America. Beyond these living caricatures of [B]lack and Christian America, PBS specials, black and white footage of the Civil Rights era, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s, "I

Have a Dream” speech, have informed what many Americans know about [B]lack Christians, especially the Black Church.” (“R.I.P”).

The rhetoric of very few Black Christian orators has permeated prevailing American culture; thusly, the rhetors who have gained mainstream access have largely shaped public perception of Black Christian rhetoric and the Black Church at large. Clearly, there exist marked discontinuities between traditional Eurocentric renderings of the tenets of Christianity and the predominant modes of delivering the gospel of Christ within the Black Church. Perhaps these dissimilarities have contributed to the mainstream marginalization and misapprehension of many of the rhetorical conventions pervasive within the African American sermonic tradition. That is, the Black Church exhibits a style of worship and method of sermon delivery that is readily discernable from that of the traditional White church, from which it seceded. This derivation and subsequent divergence has caused the African American Christian tradition to be viewed by many as a distorted, if diluted variety of Christianity and relegated the rhetoric disseminated therein to a position of forced peripherality.

Scholars, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya speak to this widespread public misconception regarding Black Church practices in *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. They contend that the problem of the conventional views regarding the Black Church and Black religion at large lies with the erroneously uncritical assumption that the religious aspect of the African American experience is

simply a reproduction of White religion, “shadowed by an African American patina predisposing it to an inordinate exoticism and emotionalism”, a view which significantly distorts and misrepresents the true expression of the faith (xi). Black Church culture, specifically African American sermonic rhetoric, is often rendered invisible by mainstream culture, or when acknowledged, is dismissed or parodied as overly theatrical and excessively emotional. However, I contend that the African American sermonic tradition is comprised of a richly emotive and highly communicative rhetorical cache that cannot be accurately conceptualized as merely an appropriation of White Christianity, but is more aptly conceived of as an independently generative tradition marked by a complex, multifaceted rhetorical system peculiar to the African American experience.

The lack of public exposure to the rhetoric and culture of the Black Church was evinced relatively recently by the controversy surrounding the comments, preaching style, and strident delivery of Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Many commented on what was perceived as the *angry tone* Wright employed in his now infamous sermon excerpts. However, I argue that his tone was widely misconstrued as a result of the continued misunderstanding by mainstream America of the Black rhetorical tradition. Reverend Wright is best known for shouting “God Damn America” from his pulpit in 2003. This, and other controversial comments were unearthed in 2008 in light of Barack Obama, a long-time member of Wright’s

congregation, acquiring the Democratic presidential nomination. While I evoke Wright, here, only as a recent incarnation of the misunderstanding on the part of mainstream America regarding the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the African American rhetorical tradition as a whole, later in this exposition, I will explicate excerpts from several of Wright's sermons, as his rhetorical style lends itself seamlessly to discussions of how AAVE and discursive tools peculiar to the African American rhetorical tradition color sermons within the Black Church.

Beyond the apparently racially motivated mainstream disregard for and marginalization of African American sermonic rhetoric, perhaps another explanation for the lack of exposure to and widespread misapprehension of the rhetoric of the Black Church stems from the inability of print-based analysis to deal adequately with an oral artistry. African American sermonic rhetorical style is most effective and impactful when heard audibly, as African American culture is primarily an oral/aural culture and many of the nuances and rhetorical tools used in African American discourse do not seamlessly translate into a written medium.

Scholar, Lyndrey Niles contends, in the article "Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching", that the analytical study or rhetorical criticism of Black sermons often proves difficult, because manuscripts of these sermons are very rarely available. He attributes the lack of mainstream familiarity with the rhetoric of the

Black Church to five problems he deems readily identifiable. In order to preserve the precision of his collation, I will quote him at length. Niles contends

(1) Most Black sermons were not and are not prepared in manuscript form.

(2) Most Black sermons through the centuries were not and are not tape-recorded during delivery.

(3) Some preachers are reluctant to release copies for criticism.

(4) Since most Black sermons are in dialogue form, manuscripts may not satisfactorily represent what actually took place in the church.

(5) Sermons in the Black tradition were not written to be read. Much of the real impact, therefore, is lost unless the critic knows how the words would have sounded, and can picture the delivery in his or her mind as he or she reads the manuscript. (44)

That is to say, the verbal and paralinguistic artistry inherent in Black Church homiletics does not lend itself easily to transcription, as much of the tradition involves visual as well as audible, yet non-verbal elements such as rhythm, cadence, and intonation. Also, many Black Church preachers are aware of the mainstream unfamiliarity with African American sermonic rhetoric as a genre and are reluctant to release sermons for uncontextualized critique by those unaccustomed to the

rhetorical mores of the tradition. Undoubtedly, the abovementioned constraints have contributed to the lack of exposure of Black Church sermons and consequent, widespread public misconception of Black homiletics. Without an understanding of and appreciation for the concept of behavioral and rhetorical license that pervades the African American sermonic tradition, some of the rhetorical tools that many Black preachers employ during sermon delivery may seem somewhat anomalous. Therefore, one of the predominant objectives of this effort is to situate African American sermonic rhetoric and its culturally specific discursive modalities within the context of the African American Diasporic experience.

1.2 Summary Review of Relevant Scholarship

I do not wish to overstate the inattention to African American religious rhetoric, as many scholars have acknowledged the phenomenon of Black performativity as it emerges in many areas of the African American rhetorical tradition. Further, numerous researchers have explored semantic license as it informs the secular African American rhetorical tradition, while others have discussed certain linguistic and paralinguistic patterns that emerge within Black Church sermons. However, these scholars have taken a largely linguistic, rather than rhetorical, approach to the explanation and explication of African American verbal performance. That is, many scholars discuss the communicative aspects of the African American religious tradition and AAVE as a linguistic phenomenology, but overlook their

concurrent rhetorical functions. However, in the current project, I will perform a rhetorical explication of these features. That is, I will explore the persuasive and communicative effect that certain rhetorical tactics have on their intended audience in order to demonstrate that the African American sermonic tradition houses a wealth of rhetorically significant apparatuses seldom, if ever, observed outside of the tradition.

In *Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America*, Black scholar, linguist, and social critic, Geneva Smitherman makes a substantial contribution to the understanding of the ethnically specific linguistic patterns of many African Americans (which she refers to as Black Language and contends constitutes a language separate from English) by setting language use in the larger context of Black culture. In addition to defining Black English by its distinctive structure and special lexicon, Smitherman argues that Black English is distinct and patently distinguishable from Standard English via a linguistic style that reflects its African origins. Smitherman also addresses the issue of Black and White attitudes toward Black English. She argues that “an honest summary of our language history over the past 3 decades warrants the conclusion that progress has been made... we no longer have to fight for the legitimacy of African American speech” (154). While Smitherman discusses Black English both prescriptively and descriptively, or as it is spoken within the Black community, including the pulpit of the Black Church, she does not examine the rhetorical and paralinguistic features peculiar to Black Church sermons. That is,

Smitherman performs a largely phenomenological survey of African American communicative practices without discussing at length their rhetorical function.

Few scholars have delved into the performativity integral to many Black Church sermons. However, Arthur K. Spears, author of “African American Communicative Practices: Improvisation, Semantic License, and Augmentation” discusses the keen linguistic consciousness and emphasis on self-display inherent in many African American communicative practices. He states that “*Black style, the Black aesthetic, Black performativity* are three terms among others that have been used to capture the most significant interconnected themes throughout African American culture” (101). Spears defines performativity as the “stylistic dramatization of the self that individuals infuse into their behaviors” (104). Similarly, editors H. Samy Alim and John Baugh posit in *Talkin’ Black Talk : Language, Education, and Social Change* that:

Black speakers are greatly flamboyant, flashy, and exaggerative; Black [speeches] are highly stylized, dramatic, and spectacular. But Black communicative performance is a two way street, and so the audience becomes both observers and participants in the speech event. With its responses, the listeners can influence the direction of a given rap and at the same time acknowledge (or withhold) their approval depending

on the linguistic skill of the speaker. No preacher can succeed if he's not a good talker. (Alim 81)

Alim recognizes the affinity for linguistic proficiency evident throughout the African American rhetorical tradition. He continues that "black folks highly value verbal skills expressed orally. Black culture abounds with verbal rituals and rhetorical devices through which this oral linguistic competence can be expressed" (81). This behavioral and semantic license that characterizes the communicative behaviors of many African Americans often emerges in religious sermons. However, Spears, Alim, and Baugh limit their discussions of African American semantic license to secular modes of communication. That is, they explain some of the specifically African American rhetorical modes such as freestyle rapping, poetry slam, dirty dozens among others, but only cursorily treat the manner of performance specific to Black Church homiletics.

In *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* scholar Gayraud Wilmore discusses some of the rhetorical and thematic tropes heavily drawn upon within the African American Christian rhetorical tradition. He states that "black philosophers and preachers disclose some of the seminal ideas of twentieth-century black theology: survival, self-help, elevation, chosenness, emigration, unity, reparations, liberation" (236). Wilmore contends that "religion is and continues to be an essential thread in the fabric of Black culture despite Black sociological heterogeneity with respect to

such secular factors as regional differences and socio-economic backgrounds” (220). Wilmore situates the Black Church within a discussion of Black liberation theology in order to contextualize some of the common, culturally and ethnically-specific themes within Black Church sermons. While Black liberation theology is highly valuable to an understanding of the African American Christian tradition, Wilmore is more concerned with the theological underpinnings of Black Church sermons, while I, in the current project, am more concerned with the rhetorical ones.

Perhaps the scholarship of J.L Dillard most closely approaches an analysis of the linguistic, paralinguistic, and semantic features of typical Black Church sermons. Dillard acknowledges that Black preachers often vary intonation, volume, and pitch within sermons in order to create emphasis, fully express themselves, and convey the message of the gospel with fervor. He contends that in *Black English*:

Middle-class black communities have, as frequently noted, closed the gap by assimilation. In the rural and storefront churches, however, kinesics (the characteristics of body movement) and paralinguistics (qualities of the voice such as harshness, raspiness, or softness) are unlike the nearest [W]hite equivalents in at least some particulars. (45)

Dillard describes a typical Black Church service as follows:

The sermon starts, typically with a bible [sic] reading and a discourse on the meaning of the selected verse. As the preacher proceeds the

congregation becomes more and more involved they *bear him up* by calling antiphonally “Das right,” “Sho Nuff,” “Sweet Jesus!,” and “Preacher,” or simply echo part of his words all neatly in his off beats.

(54)

While Dillard acknowledges and treats the practice of audience participation and enthusiastic delivery often associated with Black Church sermons, I argue that Dillard’s approach is also phenomenological in that he typologically classifies these exchanges between speaker and audience without discussing at length their rhetorical basis or potential effect on the audience. As stated, in this exposition I will delve into the rhetorical significance and communicative function of the features of typical Black Church sermons, as scholarship examining these conventions from a rhetorical perspective is limited.

Certainly, I do not present the aforementioned scholars as an exhaustive survey of the scholarship concerning African American rhetoric or the rhetoric of the Black Church. However, the above scholarship is cited merely to demonstrate that there remains a chasm within the field of rhetoric, as the African American religious tradition is replete with emotionally generative, e/affective rhetorical tactics particular to the African American community which must be examined more fully, as these rhetorical elements undoubtedly enrich the field of rhetoric.

1.3 Methodology

My overarching aim in this exposition is threefold. Primarily, my goal is to examine many of the common rhetorical and communicative features of many Black Church sermons in order to demonstrate that these rhetorical practices, paralinguistics, and modes of delivery are inextricable from any exhaustive discussion of the flexibility and function of language within the field of rhetoric. More specifically, I contend that African American rhetoric, namely African American *sermonic* rhetoric, constitutes a distinct, ethnically specialized variety of rhetoric generated out of the distinctive cultural circumstances of the African American Diasporic experience.

As a guiding definition, I subscribe to Kenneth Burke's conception of rhetoric. For Burke, rhetoric is everywhere and encompasses all communicative interactions. Burke purports that rhetorical analysis is appropriately applied to every kind of writing and speaking and may even be applied directly to the study of human relations. Similarly, I present the study of African American homiletics as a lens through which to view the intersections between culture and aural text. In order to examine the rhetorical tools peculiar to the African American religious tradition, I later perform a solely rhetorical explication of many of the typical elements of Black Church sermons. To allow for this process, I have conducted archival research in order to generate transcribed Black Church sermons for the purpose of explicating the rhetorical and

paralinguistic components therein. I have selected five modern Black Christian orators on which to focus in this project, Bishop T.D Jakes, Bishop Paul Morton, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Bishop Noel Jones, and Dr. Juanita Bynum. I find it necessary to mention that I chose to treat and explicate the sermons of more widely recognized African American preachers in order to show that despite the notoriety and status of these African American Christian rhetors, few scholars have performed rhetorical analysis of their sermons. Furthermore, my rationale for citing the sermons of the abovementioned preachers is that their sermon excerpts are readily accessible online, which allows for audio-visual recordings of their sermons to be compared with the scholarship presented in this project. My hope, however, is to conduct later and catalyze further research which delves into the sermonic rhetoric of lesser known preacher-rhetors. I have transcribed excerpts from each of the aforementioned Christian orators' sermons and explicate the contemporaneous rhetorical and communicative features which I deem demonstrable through a written medium. This approach allows me to simultaneously explain and demonstrate the rhetorical maneuvers intrinsic in the African American sermonic tradition, which serves the larger focus of this project.

Secondarily, my goal in this exposition is to examine the use of AAVE and code-switching within Black Church sermons, not simply as an informal language choice, but as a strategic rhetorical tool that fosters the credibility of the speaker and

solidarity between preacher and congregation. I attempt to undergird this assertion by explicating excerpts of sermons performed by some of the aforementioned Black Christian orators in order to demonstrate the communicative and ethos-building effect that the intentional interspersions of AAVE within Black Church sermons has on the audience. AAVE is ubiquitous within Black culture, and perhaps the area in which its pervasiveness has been the most underplayed is in the religious rhetorical tradition. Moreover, I argue that the strategic use of AAVE within Black Church sermons serves a hermeneutical function. That is to say, the preacher's choice to deploy AAVE within Black Church sermons not only fosters solidarity between Black speakers and Black congregation, but aids in "meaning-making" on the part of the congregation as well as facilitates in the process of Biblical interpretation.

Finally, my tertiary aim in this project is to situate African American sermonic rhetoric within a classical rhetorical context in order to demonstrate both the overlap and dissimilarities between the two for the purpose of setting forth the study of African American sermonic rhetoric as a pedagogical framework for demonstrating the five rhetorical canons as well as epideictic rhetoric. That is to say, I use the more ubiquitous and endemic field of Classical rhetoric as a reference point to which to tether my arguments about the rhetoric of Black Church sermons, while simultaneously showing that African American sermonic rhetoric constitutes a didactic, practical application of certain Classical rhetorical tenets, therefore

representing a pedagogical opportunity for a return to all five canons of rhetoric as an educational paradigm. With its emphasis on the often elsewhere neglected aspects of style and delivery, the study of African American sermonic rhetoric constitutes a fitting, modern approach to discussions of all five Aristotelian rhetorical canons, as the African American sermonic tradition includes inspired invention, strategic arrangement, expressive style, keen memorization, and emotive, affective delivery.

Throughout this exposition, I will deploy classical rhetorical theory as the critical apparatus by which to discuss the emphasis on audience, style, and modes of delivery that emphasize performativity, which are inherent in the homiletics of many Black churches. That is, as I explicate excerpts from modern archetypal Black Church sermons, I will comparatively discuss the rhetoric of these homilies through the lens of classical rhetorical theory in order to establish a more widely recognized frame of reference. I will refer to the works of Aristotle, Isocrates, Cicero, and St. Augustine among others in order to illustrate the commonalities between classical rhetoric and the rhetorical conventions that pervade the African American sermonic tradition as well as the divergences that make African American sermonic rhetoric unique.

1.4 Organization

I have chosen to first establish my argument by historicizing and disambiguating some of the terminology and concepts that will be employed

throughout this project. I further construct my argument through contextualization of the themes and concepts treated herein. I continue to support my argument through explication and demonstration of the rhetorical tenets discussed within this exposition. Thus, in chapter one, I define the *Black Church* as both an entity and a terminology followed by a brief history of the Black Church. Later in the first chapter, I examine the communal culture of the Black Church by exploring the complex role of the preacher, the prominence of the sermon event, and notions of ethos within the African American sermonic tradition. The focus of chapter two is the pervasive motif of speaker-listener interaction within the sermon moment. That is, I will discuss the manner in which audience participation during the sermon often shapes the overall sermon event, establishes significance through emphasis, and fosters a sense of solidarity among the congregation. Specifically, I will define and discuss the rhetorical and hermeneutical significance of rhetorical practices such as call-response, “repeat-after-me”, strategic pause, among others, and highlight the ways in which each interactive element informs the discursive tradition of the Black Church. To aid in this process, I will explicate excerpts of sermons that employ the abovementioned rhetorical embellishments in order demonstrate the ways in which many preachers use these tactics to foster audience participation.

The focus of the third chapter shifts to the significance of African American sermonic rhetoric as a pedagogical tool. That is, I intend to show that the commonalities between the ornate style of delivery, performativity in the form of self-

display, and extemporaneity within typical Black Church sermons constitutes a variety of epideictic rhetoric. Later, chapter four explores the paralinguistic features that often adorn Black Church sermons. I will define and discuss the communicative effect of sing-song style, gravelly voice, and tone, pitch, and volume variance among other paralinguistic features. I will also discuss the rhetorical significance of gesticulation and physical performativity (that is, elaborate gesturing and utilization of the entire platform or stage) that often emerges in Black homiletics. Lastly, code-switching, or interspersing AAVE and Standard English, is the focus of the fifth and final chapter, within which I discuss the rhetorical and hermeneutical significance of employing the ethnically-specific vernacular in preaching the Gospel.

Before delving into a treatment of the rhetorical conventions integral to many Black Church sermons, I find it necessary to delineate the scope of the current project. Firstly, while I cite and explicate religious rhetoric, I do not extensively treat the theological tenets of Black Church sermons in this exposition, as Christian doctrine as rendered in the Black Church extends beyond the scope of rhetorical convention and is a topic for a separate discussion. Also, I limit the denominations included in this project to African American Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, African American Non-Denominational, Pentecostal, and Church of God in Christ congregations. That is not to imply that all of these groups or denominations display all of the rhetorical, paralinguistic, or hermeneutical features discussed in this paper; or that the aforementioned groups are the only denominations that display the

rhetorical features that will be examined herein. I have simply chosen to limit the present discussion to these groups, as largely, African Americans who self-identify as Christians subscribe to these denominations. Also, it is necessary to limit the denominations included in the present exposition as a regulatory measure, as there are African Americans belonging to every Christian denomination in existence. Accordingly, James H. Harris contends in *The Word Made Plain* “the Black Church is a socially diverse, sociologically and theologically complicated phenomenon. Yet, seven major denominations comprise 80 to 85 percent of all Blacks who profess to be Christians. The Black Church remains, overwhelmingly, Baptist, African Methodist, and Church of God in Christ” (xi).

Furthermore, within the aforementioned denominations, I deal solely with those congregations in which the pastor or appointed preacher is of African descent. That is not to argue that there are not non-African American preachers who readily employ African American homiletical style within these denominations, or that all African American preachers within these denominations employ any or all of the rhetorical features treated in this discussion. I simply find it necessary to make this distinction for the sake of regularity and to narrow the breadth of this project.

Within this exposition I include and explicate transcribed sermon excerpts by African American preachers who pastor churches located in several different geographical regions of the United States. I use these excerpted sermons to provide

examples of the rhetorical strategies prevalent within the African American sermonic tradition which are demonstrable through a written medium. However, my intent is less to compare the textual similarities of these excerpted sermons as it is to show the pervasiveness of the rhetorical tactics outlined in this paper. That is, I do not wish to minimize the significance of regional variation as it informs sermonic style and modes of delivery, nor do I wish to imply that the communicative features discussed in this project are homogeneously practiced throughout the country. However, many of the rhetorical and paralinguistic features discussed herein are pervasive throughout the *Black Church* as later defined in this exposition. Once again, to restrict the scale of this project I choose to focus on the common, if ubiquitous, rhetorical and communicative features within the African American sermonic tradition while only tacitly allowing for regional variation.

Furthermore, in this exposition, I shall use the ethnic nomenclature *African American* and *Black* interchangeably to describe people of African descent whose ancestors were brought to North America and the Caribbean for the purpose of slavery, as there is no consensus within the community as to what the ethnicity should be called. I also deem it obligatory to state that I do not intend to imply that all or nearly all African Americans subscribe to Christianity. Concurrently, scholar, Stacey Floyd-Thomas asserts in *The Black Church: An Introduction* that “important, too, is the need to contextualize the Black Church as one form of religious expression

of Blacks in the United States. The tendency to construct African American religious experience as a monolithic category called the Black Church obscures the variety of Black religious expression, including non Christian traditions” (100). I fully acknowledge the heterogeneity inherent in the renderings of Black religious experience and expression. However, Christianity, especially as delivered within the entity known as the Black Church, constitutes an inextricable part of the African American experience and the rhetorical modes practiced therein warrant further attention that for the confines of brevity can only be fragmentarily treated here.

CHAPTER 2

BLACK CHURCH CULTURE

2.1 What Constitutes the Black Church?

Before exploring the rhetorical and paralinguistic tactics pervasive within the Black Church, I find it necessary to first contextualize the forthcoming discussion by historicizing, defining, and describing the *Black Church* as both an entity and a terminology.

The Black Church was a creation of African American people whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of an oppressive and racist society. The visage of the Black Church in America is a venue in which Black clergymen speak to Black congregations about issues that affect Black Christians.

The Black Church has long been considered a bulwark in the Black community, as it plays an integral role in the religious and social aspects that comprise the African American experience. However, the *Black Church*, as a term, seems to inherently carry with it an air of ambiguity. Black activist and leading Black liberation theologian, James Cone defines the Black Church as “that institution or group of Christian denominations ‘owned and operated’ by people of African descent”

(241). But, its function within the Black community extends farther than any singular definition allows.

It is necessary to note that the *Black Church*, for the purposes of the present discussion, should not be conceptualized as an aggregate of brick and mortar installations, but more so as a broad designation encompassing a heterogeneous group of Christian worshippers of the same ethnicity. Authors of "Jesus is a Rock: Spirituals as Lived Experience" Melbourne S. Cummings and Judi Moore Latta contend that "the [B]lack [C]hurch is a sociological and theological construct encompassing the pluralism of Black Christians in the United States" (60). While I agree that the *Black Church* as a term houses complex sociological and theological aspects, I will solely employ James Cone's aforementioned definition of the Black Church for the sake of uniformity and in order to disambiguate the term. That is, for the purposes of this discussion, the Black Church shall be constituted by any predominantly Black congregation led by a Black clergyperson in the United States (from within the abovementioned denominations) even if it is part of a historically White denomination.

2.2 Brief History of the Black Church

After much discord among the White Christian Church regarding whether slaves should be imparted the tenets of Christianity, missionaries began to evangelize African slaves in the early 1700's. However, the brand of Christianity

preached to the slaves was one that attempted to justify their bondage. White apologists developed exegetically-based arguments to support their interpretation that Paul and other New Testament writers handed down specific directives regarding master-slave relations. In turn, White missionaries tried to convince Black slaves that life on earth was insignificant because “obedient servants of God could expect a reward in heaven after death” (Cone 121). This interpretation of Christianity attempted to divest the slaves of any hope for freedom in the present. Scholar Cedrick May discusses the variety of Christianity disseminated to the African slaves in *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic*. May states that

a religion that explained their temporal situation as the will of the divine, supported their enslavement, and promised only otherworldly rewards was not appealing. Many descendants of these African-born peoples who converted to traditionalist Calvinist Christianity quickly began rethinking the apolitical religion delivered to them by European proselytizers, arriving at theological positions that came to play a large role in connecting resistance to Christian duty in temporal terms. (4-5)

Early White southern clergymen and slave owners interpreted the Bible to serve the cause of keeping slaves in bondage. However, Black slaves began to appropriate and interpret the same Scriptures in a manner that served their cause of freedom and equality. Cone asserts in *Black Theology & Black Power* that the Black Church was

born in protest. “Its reality stemmed from the eschatological recognition that freedom and equality are at the essence of humanity, and thus segregation and slavery are diametrically opposed to Christianity” (94). That is, the Black Church was formed out the slaves’ revelations regarding the incongruousness of slavery within Christian theology. The indoctrination of slaves with the precepts of Christianity proved to dismantle the validity of the institution of slavery in their minds. The more they learned about the benevolent nature of the deity they served, the less they accepted the plight of slavery.

As more and more Blacks began attending White Christian church services, restrictions in seating, communion services, and limits on participation in worship caused many Blacks to form their own congregations and later establish separate denominations. Thus, the organization of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was formed. This new autonomy marked what would become the beginning of formation of the *Black Church*. May contends that “Christianity gave these enslaved African-descended peoples something that masters wanted to deny: a sense of common identity and purpose that created the conditions for organization and collective action” (3). For many slaves, the early Black Church was the sole source of identity and sense of community, and served as a haven where they could worship without being judged against the rigid status quo of hegemonic religious norms. Cone states that “relatively early, the Church furnished the one and only organized field in which the slaves’ suppressed emotions could be released” (96). These early church

services provided a venue for slaves to fully express themselves through worship in ways that would have been deemed inappropriate by White Church patrons.

With these separate Church services came a distinct and acclimatized Christian doctrine. God was interpreted by slaves as a loving father who would eventually deliver them from bondage just as he had delivered Israel from oppression in Egypt. Jesus was considered both a savior and an elder brother with whom they found solidarity in suffering (Cone 96). Blacks began to amend and adapt the eschatological notions imparted by White clergymen. In this new understanding, heaven had a dual implication for Black slaves. Salvation referred to the future life after physical death, but it also came to represent a state of liberation in the present. The formation of the Black Church marked the first time African-born slaves began to collectively examine religion as it related to their own plight.

Concurrently, Wilmore contends that Blacks have utilized Christianity in a dissimilar capacity than it was delivered to them by White missionaries, and that their understanding of Christianity served to authenticate for them God's concern and regard for their experience of suffering and struggle, and "to reinforce the acculturated religious orientation and to produce an indigenous faith that emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare" (4). While Black slaves accepted the major theological tenets of Christianity, they implemented some substantive changes due to their collective longing for liberation and restoration as well as preexisting African customs. That is to say, slaves seceded from the White Christian Church not only

due to fundamental theological disparities between Black and White applications of Christianity, but largely due to some intrinsic differences in the ways in which they wished to express themselves in worship. From its inception, the Black Church has exhibited a markedly celebratory and emotive style of devotion and theology. Some of the ways in which the Black Church distinguished itself from the earlier White Christian tradition is through its communal culture, markedly affective style of delivery in preaching the gospel, the congregation's direct involvement in the sermon event, and somewhat colloquial means by which the pastor often communicates with his or her congregation. Perhaps the most deeply entrenched of these cultural norms originating in the early Black Church that persists into modernity is the sense of community among its members.

2.3 Emphasis on Community within the Black Church

A treatment of communalism within the Black Church is central to contextualizing any discussion of African American sermonic rhetoric, as the collectivist culture of the Black Church inexorably informs the nature of the rhetoric disseminated therein. The sense of cohesion and interconnection fostered within Black Church culture is largely predicated on and reinforced by the interactive and collaborative nature of the sermon event, the cooperative leadership role of the pastor/preacher, and the implicit requirement of relevant content and relatable delivery of the sermon.

Ever since Christianity was imparted to slaves, the faith has served as a unifying, affirming force among African American peoples. Wilmore argues that “religion is and continues to be an essential thread in the fabric of Black culture despite Black sociological heterogeneity with respect to such secular factors as regional differences and socio-economic backgrounds” (220). In other words, religion, namely Christianity, within the Black community, defies class distinction and serves a unifying function among its congregants. Religious faith has served as a coping mechanism that has helped sustain African Americans as they contend with the mores of an unrelentingly racist society. The Black Church as a referent has been melded into the collective African American identity. Often African Americans who have not or do not actively participate in or attend Church services still recognize Black Church rhetorical allusions because these types of references overflow into secular communication and activities. Thus, the Black Church remains one of the most significant African American discursive and communal spaces that comprise the Black experience.

Scholar Mary R. Sawyer contends in “Theocratic, Prophetic, and Ecumenical: Political Roles of African American Clergy” that distinct from White impartations of Christianity, “black religious tradition... holds as its ultimate values communalism, the welfare of the collectivity, the integral relation of the spiritual and the material, and the moral obligation to pursue social-political concretization of the theological principles of equality, justice, and inclusiveness (67). The communal milieu of the Black Church

serves as a source of individual and collective identity for many Black Americans. In the midst of dominant societal mores which champion individualism, the Black Church remains a place in which its congregants find a sense of connection to one another through a common faith and culture, as well as shared customs and discursive practices.

Sandra L. Barnes asserts in “Black Church Culture and Community Action” that although diverse religious expressions exist among African Americans, research points to certain congruities among those who self-identify as Christian in the functioning of their faith. According to Barnes, these commonalities include “scriptural interpretation, ritual development, and religious expression that are contextually relevant to the African American experience; emphasis on spiritual as well as temporal needs of congregants and community members; and, a self-help tradition”(3). Central to the rendering of Black Christian faith are “spirituals, call-and-response, gospel music, prayer and scriptural references that evoke both prophetic as well as priestly activity emerged as African Americans appropriated elements of Christianity and African religions to address their social reality” (3). In alignment with Barnes’ assertions, I contend that in the interest of communality, Black Church congregants often hold certain unstated expectations regarding the nature and formulation of the sermon event. Perhaps the most prevalent of these expectancies concerns the collective applicability of the message. That is, a common requisite

within the Black Church is that the sermon must be grounded in reality and applicable to the daily lives of the congregation. The relatable nature of the sermon is an essential component in creating and maintaining a sense of community and solidity within the Black Church. However, the standard regarding pertinence in the sermon is reflected in Black Church culture in several capacities. The relevance of the sermon as it helps establish the preacher's ethos, and resultant audience response will be treated in-depth later in this project.

Floyd-Thomas discusses the communal culture of the Black Church. He introduces the concept of *nommo*, an Afrocentric term coined by African American scholar and philosopher Molefi Asante, the meaning of which I will quote at length here for the sake of clarity. Asante describes *nommo* as

an African concept regarding the force of life communicated through the power of the word in the community. It is a collective experience between speaker and hearer...form and expression in rhythms, physical presence, and participation work together with the content of worldview, folklore, or moral and theological themes. Speakers and hearers generate a collective experience of communication or public discourse (253).

Nommo refers to the power of words to create and generate collective perceptions of reality. Asante further sees the concept of *nommo* as a communal occasion that moves toward the creation and maintenance of the community. That is to say, *nommo* points to the importance of speaking to the community as conceptualized as a whole rather than as an aggregate of individuals. For Asante, the purpose of *nommo* is to build a sense of community which is accomplished through communal experience and interaction with the spoken word. *Nommo* aims at a participation of the community in *the word* rather than remaining passive listeners. Its goal is to bring about a unified community which is one with the *word* which comes about through repetition and a form of presentation that is easily absorbed. To be clear, the concept of *nommo* is not part of the recognized nomenclature of the Black Church, however, the concepts it encompasses lend themselves seamlessly to this discussion of the communally generative nature of African American sermonic rhetoric.

2.4 Sermon Event as Crux of Black Church Experience

Essential to a proper conception of Black Church culture is an understanding of the significance of the sermon event within the worship structure. The sermon event constitutes the core of the Black Church service. Samuel G Freedman contends in *Upon This Rock*, that the delivery of the sermon is the most important occasion that takes place during the Black Church service. He refers to the delivery of the sermon as the 'preaching moment' or 'the preaching event' and likens the

sermon event to “a heavyweight prizefight for which the rest of a worship service is merely the undercard” (182). Freeman contends that the Black Church sermon is, as much as the exclamations of elation from the congregation that may answer it, an “act of syncretism and historical homage, returning to the African *griot*, the praise-singer, and to the slave preacher, teaching a liberation gospel after dark in the quarters. To be a preacher is to be a storyteller, scholar, analyst, entertainer, political theorist, and, most ineffable, the anointed of God” (182). In accordance with Freeman’s assertions, I argue that the sermon event is crucial to the vitality of the Black Church and serves as the discursive stage conducive to a multivalent religious experience for its participants.

Due to the integral role that the sermon event plays in the culture of the Black Church, as stated, Black congregations often bestow implicit expectations upon the preacher and the sermon itself. The preacher is certainly expected to read from and translate Holy Scripture. In the event that the doctrine delivered during the sermon does not align with the precepts of the Scriptures, the preacher and his or her sermon risk quickly losing credibility, and consequently, the interest and attention of the audience. As previously mentioned, another expectation often placed on the Black Church sermon event is that it will be relatable. That is, Black preachers often translate the Biblical text into more colloquial language and apply it to modernity, more specifically, to an aspect of the contemporary African American experience.

Part of what establishes the preaching event as the heart of the Black Church service is the collectivity and collaboration involved in creating the sermon moment. The level of audience participation and intensity of their affirming response during the sermon event often directly reflects the perceived relevance and applicability of the message. Floyd-Thomas argues in his chapter entitled *Black Preaching Praxis* that “in the Academy of homiletics, Black preaching traditions are esteemed practices, performance styles usually thought to be culturally shaped by communal participation in the worship service with the preaching event at its core. Mastery of delivery and engagement of the hearers are central in the admiration of Black preaching” (203). In other words, the sermon event marks the culmination of the communal worship experience within the African American Christian tradition. Black Church sermons are composed (either extemporaneously, beforehand, or some combination thereof) with the hearers in mind and imparted with the expectation that the audience will actively participate in the sermon event. I devote much of chapter two to a treatment of the tradition of audience participation, namely call-response. However, in order to demonstrate how the practice of audience participation undergirds the sense of cohesion among the congregation and between preacher and congregation, I include, here, an excerpt from a sermon delivered by Bishop Paul Morton to his Atlanta congregation in March 2011 entitled “Taking the Limits Off”. It is important to note that the utterances from the congregation, included parenthetically here, take place simultaneously rather than successively but are audibly discernable from one

another. That is, individual members of the congregation chime in with various affirming utterances only of few of which are readily discernible via audio recording. It is also necessary to note that the exclamations and affirmations of the congregation fall seamlessly into the rhythmic pauses naturally employed by Bishop Morton. He preaches:

If you're gonna' be called to greatness (Audience: alright, yes)
greatness is not going to happen in your life with limits on (Alright). I
need some out of the box folk that are ready tonight to take the limits
(Yes) off. Now could I tell you something and it's very important for us
to understand this tonight, the key ingredient in taking the limits off in
your life is faith (Amen, yes). Somebody say faith (Faith).

Presumably each member of the congregation can relate to feeling in some way limited or stifled at some point in his or her personal or professional life. Simply by virtue of being part of the ethnic minority in America, the members of the congregation can identify with the sentiment of feeling stifled conveyed in the message and, resultantly, call out testimonial attestations.

The system of call-response manifests during the sermon event in many varied incarnations and helps guide the sermon to its emotive heights. In the interest of promoting a clear understanding of Black Church culture, it is important to point out that the sermon event within the African American homiletic tradition is customarily

expected to reach a climactic end. That is, the preacher is expected to lead his/her congregation into a vitalizing enlivened state by the end of the sermon. One marker that the sermon has reached its climatic height is that the verbal and gesticulative interactivity between preacher and congregation also reaches its zenith. Niles paraphrases Henry Mitchell's assertions in *Black Preaching* by stating "that the Black climax is truly a celebration, maybe tearful or maybe ecstatic, but it is the high point at which the audience feels the strength of the point of the sermon, embraces it, and celebrates it corporately. Black religious culture is emotional, it moves people, changes lives, and is, therefore, meaningful and effective to them." (49). That is to say, the highpoint of the Black Church sermon manifests as an energetic and emotionally purgative event. It is important to be quite clear upon this point, however, that the catharsis experienced during the climax of the Black Church sermon is not believed to be brought about simply by the rhetorical prowess of the preacher or the relatable nature of the sermon, but the words and accompanying sermon "performance" are believed to manifest the Spirit of God, which brings about the transcendent religious experience.

However, the rhetorical dexterity of the preacher is not to be underplayed as an important precursor to the cathartic height of the sermon event. According to Lincoln and Mamiya, Black churches highly value charisma and accessibility in a preacher or pastor, the essence of which is measured by his/her ability to move an

audience through the message of the sermon (175). Consequently, the sermon carries a great degree of significance in the worship service of the Black Church that defies comparison to any institutional counterpart outside the African American Christian tradition. Throughout the historical expansion of the Black Church over the past two hundred years, the sermon has taken on a variety of purposes and incarnations. The whole of the sermon, for Lincoln and Mamiya, is aimed at the goal of emotional climax and catharsis. Exclamations of 'amen' and 'preach it' fill the air to show agreement, while the ubiquitous calls of 'well?' tend to urge the preacher on. Black Church congregants, typically, do not sit passively during the sermon moment but are intimately engaged. Stirring and emotive sermons that affect the "whole being mark the difference between a fine lecture and the heights of good preaching". (175) For Lincoln and Mamiya, part of the distinction between lecture and a sermon for many Black Church parishioners lies in their freedom to help steer the sermon event to its emotive heights via the conventions of the traditional call-response system.

During the rousingly interactive heights of the preaching event, the sermon can take on a cacophonous, clamorous expression. However, a sense of implicit reverence and order guides the sermon event even during its most seemingly raucous renderings. Black Church congregants characteristically know not to physically or verbally impose on or interrupt the flow of the sermon. That is, members of the audience do not "compete" with the speaker in volume or duration of their

interjections and rarely overlap the words of the preacher with exclamations of their own. Smitherman discusses the subtle order that guides the sermon climax in *Talkin' and Testifying: The Language of Black America*. She asserts that "since the traditional Black Church sermon is an emotion-packed blend of sacred and secular concerns, informality is the order of the day. It is not a lax, anything goes, kind of informality though, for there are rituals to be performed and codes of proper conduct to be observed" (87). That is, the Black Church sermon is not to be mistaken for an emotional, colloquial melee, as there are definite social and behavioral conventions that are readily observed. These conventions will be treated in more detail in chapter two.

2.5 Role of the Preacher in the Black Church

Given the elemental position of the sermon event within the Black Church, the Black clergyperson, in turn, plays an essential and assorted role within the Black Church. Wilmore suggests that Black Church preachers are charged with: "helping the congregation to discover how *preaching* and *prayer, music, and worship...* are all informed by biblical and theological knowledge... and *directed toward the fundamental transformation of persons and institutions of society.*" (357). Similarly, I contend that Black Church preachers are charged with the important hermeneutical task of making pertinent the gospel of Christ. That is, the Black pastor often perceives him or herself as spiritually and doctrinally culpable in the salvation of his

or her congregation, as is common among Christian clergypersons. The Black preacher within the African American Christian tradition is often believed to be anointed by God or divinely “called” or chosen to preach the gospel. Therefore, the role of the preacher within the Black Church vacillates between the heavenly charge of serving as a vessel for Divine impartation of the Gospel and earthly commitment to the corporeal and practical concerns of his/her congregation.

According to Floyd-Thomas “the role of the preacher is multifarious. Preachers are interpreters, heralds, conveyors of truth, witnesses, translators, artists and performers, all within the experience, relations, and interaction of the community of hearers”(208). Separate from the spiritual aspects peripheral to the current discussion, perhaps the most important rhetorical charge of the Black preacher is to deliver the gospel in a manner that aids in its palpability and in a style conducive to the meaning-making practice of audience participation.

2.6 Notions of Ethos within the Black Church

Considering the primacy of the Black clergyperson within Black Church culture, it is necessary to analyze the resultant ethical and rhetorical expectations of the office of preacher. While the term *ethos* is not a readily employed terminology within the African American sermonic tradition, the credibility of the speaker or preacher is an integral component within Black Church homiletics. However, its applicability within the Black Church extends farther than the classical definition

allows. Traditionally, ethos is largely conveyed through the tone and style of the message and through the even-minded manner in which the speaker refers to differing views. Classical notions of ethos can also be influenced by the speaker's reputation as it exists independently from the message reflecting the speaker's expertise in the field or his or her previous record or integrity. Many aspects such as character, rhetorical skill, and the ability to be relatable to his/her audience factor into the credibility of a Black preacher within the Black Church. Cleophus James LaRue contends in *The Heart of Black Preaching* that characteristically, African American Christian congregations consider their preachers to be divine representatives or, moreover, vessels through which God chooses to manifest his presence, thus making them worthy of great deference and esteem (12). Larue continues, Black congregations tend to entrust their preachers or pastors with great authority, and in turn, these Black preachers feel free to exercise a certain linguistic and performative freedom in the pulpit. Many homiletics scholars purport that much of the rhetorical and paralinguistic ingenuity experienced in Black preaching is "directly attributable to this longstanding freedom and pulpit autonomy" (12). This authority, however, does not arise organically, but instead the Black preacher must acquire this "clout" through passionate and effective preaching, as well as longstanding meaningful relationships and connections with members of the congregation. Larue contends that when the preacher becomes secure in his/her authority, he or she "enjoys a certain license in the preaching event that allows the preacher to engage in a creative, thought

provoking, exchange between the text, the congregation, and the preacher. The preacher, sensing unrestricted access, soars to unparalleled heights in his or her effort to ‘make it plain’” (12). That is, one of the major concerns of the Black preacher is to impart the message of the gospel in a manner that best aids in its absorption. As a byproduct of the credibility entrusted to the African American preacher, he/she garners the tacit permission from the audience to exercise a degree of sanctioned authority. For Larue, this notion of authority “originated prior to the transatlantic slave trade in Africa, where the priests and medicine men, because of the importance ascribed to their offices, were afforded a high degree of admiration and respect. The responsibilities of those priests and medicine men were transferred in some measure to the slave preachers” in America (12).

In concurrence with Larue’s assertions, I contend that Black preachers are granted a degree of deference and credibility *ex-officio*, meaning that they occupy a preexisting credibility simply by right of their office as ministers of the gospel. However, another aspect of the Black preacher’s ethos must be earned by his/her reputation for piety and trustworthiness. While I will examine the cross-sections between Classical rhetoric and African American sermonic rhetoric extensively in chapter three, I find it necessary to evoke the works of Aristotle and Quintilian, here, in order to contextualize notions of ethos as it emerges in Black Church sermons, as

each of these Classical rhetoricians made considerable contributions to modern conceptions of *ethos* as a term.

This notion of credibility as predicated on a speaker's reputation for piety is reminiscent of Quintilian's assertions in *Institutio Oratoria*. Quintilian argues that mastery of rhetoric should be considered a virtue because it entails intimate knowledge of *the good*. There lies a definite parallel between Quintilian's conception that good character is a compulsory criterion in an effective rhetor and the notion of credibility inherent in being regarded as an effective speaker within in the Black Church. A preacher or pastor within the Black Church must be extremely well-versed in scripture and Christian precepts and carry out these principles in his or her daily life. If a preacher within the Black Church is believed to be impious, this can serve to discount his/her credibility and compromise the validity and persuasiveness of his/her message.

Similarly, according to Aristotle, an audience's perception of a speaker's character influences how believable or convincing they find the speaker's oration. Often, an audience is somewhat familiar with the character of a speaker before his public address. That is, public speakers often occupy a preconceived reputation or intrinsic *ethos* that influences his/her ability to persuade. For Aristotle, whether or not an audience knows anything about the speaker beforehand, the actual oration and the truth therein conveys an impression of the author's character and/or morals.

However, the ideal orator for Aristotle is one who allows his argument to speak for itself without regard to preceding reputation. He argues in *On Rhetoric*:

[there is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way to make the speaker worthy of credence. For we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly than we do [others], on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt. And this should result from the speech, not from a previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person; for this is not the case...rather, character is almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion. (39)

Aristotle acknowledges that the perceived credibility of the speaker often influences the audience's receptivity to the speaker's message even as he argues that ideally the message would be self-evident. That is, for Aristotle, ethos can be developed by the credibility earned by the speaker's actions and lifestyle before the public address, but ethos can also be cultivated during an oration as the audience recognizes the speaker's preparedness, as well as the accuracy, and believability of his words.

Aristotle's idea that the rhetor should garner ethos through his/her oration rather than automatically granted the ethos that accompanies a good reputation, is nowhere more patent than in the African American rhetorical tradition. While a pious

reputation garners the Black preacher intrinsic esteem, he/she is not exempt from having to further fortify his/her reputation through his/her performance during the sermon event. That is, Black preachers must not only lead a circumspect life according to Christian principles, but skillfully perform and deliver the sermon in order to establish and maintain the veneration of their congregation.

According to the Classical rhetorical tradition, in order to be persuasive and establish credibility with an audience, a rhetor must be well-spoken. He or she must have an impeccable command of language and perform seemingly effortless verbal acrobatics while remaining accessible to his or her audience. Similarly, within the African American Christian tradition, verbal acumen and command of both standard and dialectical language forms bolster the ethos of the Black preacher.

Quintilian's idea that subject matters discussed in oratory should be as relatable as possible corresponds with the key tenet within the Black Church that sermons should be as applicable to the everyday life of the congregation as possible and spoken in the language of the common man. For example, Many Black preachers choose to strategically integrate mildly secular material into their sermons to ensure their accessibility. Even the language or word choice of the speaker within the Black Church often reflects the common language use of the congregation in order to establish or maintain rapport and, in turn, be persuasive. Many Black Christian orators oscillate between AAVE and Standard English in order to remain accessible while still appearing learned, thus maintaining his/her ethos with his/her

congregation. The practice of code-switching between AAVE and Standard English during the sermon event will be discussed more in-depth in chapter four.

The elements of Black Church culture such as emphasis on communality, the sermon event as the crux of the Black Church service, and multifarious role of the preacher all shape the African American Christian rhetorical tradition and inform the convention of audience participation, namely the call-response system, which shall be the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND INTERACTION

3.1 Call-Response

An exploration of the distinctive rhetorical dynamics of Black Church sermons requires a discussion of the pervasive call-response system, as much of the discourse extant within the African American sermonic tradition hinges on audience participation. Extensive discursive involvement on the part of the congregation plays an important role in shaping the sermon event. Verbal and performative interactivity between the pastor and congregation, both solicited and that which arises naturally, drives the sermon and partly comprises the remarkable rhetorical situation that is the Black Church sermon.

As previously discussed, one manner in which the worship practices of the Black Church are distinguishable from those of its non-black Christian counterparts is through the congregation's direct involvement in the sermon event via the pervasive call-response system and the markedly enthusiastic and often colloquial means by which the pastor/preacher often communicates with his/her congregation. The following section will examine the various renderings of the call-response system within the Black Church as more than simply an automatic cultural tendency, but

rather as a meaningful communicative phenomenon and e/affective rhetorical interchange.

The term *call-response* is typically understood as the repetitive call and echoed response demonstrated in the form of sung Spirituals. The emphasis on this form of interaction between Church members dates back to the early period of the Black Church in which the Church was a beacon of unity in society that united and sustained the Black family through the course of slavery. More specifically, the communicative tradition of call-response originated during the course of African slavery in America in order for slaves to communicate with one another without their messages being deciphered by White slave owners. Slaves learned to sing “encoded” messages of liberation even in the master’s presence. This clandestine form of communication became vital, as it was used to help plan slaves’ escapes via the Underground Railroad. Typically, one slave would begin to sing a song such as, “Crossing the River Jordan” as others responded with an answer verse in order to covertly communicate instructions on how to attain freedom in the North. Scholar and social critic Cornel West states that “the African American Spiritual--with its motifs of homelessness, namelessness, and hope against hope--is the artistic expression of this human outcry in the New World” (470). Sung in AAVE, these Spirituals simultaneously expressed the lamentations and hopeful sentiments of the oppressed, while covertly spreading the message of freedom.

One Spiritual that remains relevant within the Black Church is “Swing Low Sweet Chariot”. Here, Emmanuel McCall adds the parenthetical explanations in *The Black Church in the African American Experience* to further explain the hidden meaning in the lyrics to this Spiritual:

Swing low, sweet chariot (Underground railroad)

Comin’ for to carry me home (North to freedom)

Swing Low (Come close to where I am)

Sweet Chariot

Coming for to carry me Home

I looked over Jordan (Ohio River-border between North and South)

And what did I see,

Coming for to carry me home

A band of angels (Northern emancipators with the under-ground railroad)

Coming after me.

Coming for to carry me home. (352)

As is apparent in the explication of the above Spiritual, one of the enduring qualities of Spirituals is their propensity toward misinterpretation by those unfamiliar with the hidden meaning in the lyrics. It is believed that had it not been for the dual nature of the lyrics that many of the conspiracies that led to freedom for countless slaves would have been foiled (qtd. in Cummings 60). Spirituals were never static. Instead they reflected modifications by the entire community. Spirituals perpetuated messages of freedom and an end to injustice.

While Spirituals are no longer necessary for the purposes of covert communication, call-response Spirituals remain pervasive within the Black Church. These spirituals often demonstrate an “antiphonal call-response relationship and a dynamic redundancy” (Cummings 58). That is, Spirituals typically contain simple lyrics and short verses in order to be easily remembered and echoed. Arthur Levine as quoted by Cummings in *Jesus is a Rock: Spirituals as Lived Experience* asserts that the structure of the spirituals (the traditional call-and-response pattern or lining out hymns) kept individuals in touch or in a kind of dialogue with the community” (60). Spirituals serve as testimonial to the fact that “despite the inhumanity of the slavery system that did everything to destroy African American communality, it was unable to destroy it totally or to leave the slaves without defenses before their White masters”. (60) Sung spirituals constitute a vocal enactment of the unity they bolster. The system of call-response at large establishes cohesion among its participants. As opposed to participants simply singing along with a hymn, call-response is interactive

in a manner that fosters a sense of collaboration and camaraderie among the singers. Many spirituals consist of only a few lyrics which are repeated numerous times. This redundancy is employed as a rhetorical tool to accentuate and emphasize the message within the lyrics. (Redundancy is a common rhetorical practice within the Black Church and will be examined further in chapter four). Often, the momentum of the song and the fervor with which the message of the lyrics is received increases with each refrain.

Spirituals reflect inextricable aspects of the traditions within the Black Church and employ rhetorical elements which provide insights into the worldview and religious culture of the African American community. Cummings contends that “spirituals have always been significant to African Americans as a means of discourse, shrouded with sometimes hidden meanings and enveloped other times in blatant narratives”(66). These songs are an intrinsic part of the African American rhetorical tradition. They often reference Bible verses or tell stories of struggle or triumph. Cummings continues: “The indigenous sacred music of African Americans is tightly woven in [lyric] and performance with the lived experience of individuals” (57).

These Spirituals function as a rhetorical text, “a narrative imbedded in history, memory, and faith” (Cummings 58). Spirituals tell the stories of a vast expanse of emotions from despair to hope and strength. Cummings adds that the “communal composition is at the heart of the songs’ source, and inventiveness is the crux of the

songs' creative formulation" (66). Often, in more modern performances of sung spirituals, a sort of collective improvisation is at play. At any moment, a member of the congregation or choir might burst into spontaneous ad lib, which refers to the singing of a word or line of the song incrementally during the collective vocal pauses. This form of expressive license is similar to and undoubtedly informs the separate form of call-response (spoken as opposed to sung) that often emerges during Black Church sermon.

To be clear, apart from the rendering of call-response that gives essence to sung Spirituals, the call-response system can also be defined as a form of spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which many of the speaker's statements (calls) are punctuated by expressions (responses) from the hearer. This custom provides the audience with the opportunity to participate in the sermon event and offer favorable feedback to the message of the sermon being delivered.

While a discussion of call-response as practiced through sung Spirituals is valuable to any treatment of the African American Christian tradition, in keeping with the aims of this project, I will hereafter treat call-response solely within the context of spoken, intermittent affirmations from members of a congregation. I find the classification of call-response defined exclusively in terms of how it informs the performance of Spirituals limiting and non-inclusive of the various ways in which speaker-audience discursive practices shape Black Church sermons. For the

duration of the current exposition, call-response shall be constituted by the verbal and visual exchange between speaker and audience during the sermon event. I will, however, classify and delineate the types and varied incarnations of this variety of call-response in order to demonstrate its pervasiveness within the African American sermonic tradition.

The intricate call-response system of communication between pastor and congregation is ubiquitous within the modern Black Church. However, the phenomenon of call-response as it manifests during the sermon event is perhaps one of the most widely misapprehended aspects of the African American rhetorical tradition. According to Mitchell, “the dialogue between preacher and congregation has been viewed as at best a quaint overreaction of superstitious simple folk, or an exuberant, childish expression of a beautiful, childlike faith such as could never occur in truly sophisticated Christian worship” (95-96). That is, call-response as it emerges during the sermon moment in many Black churches is often misconstrued as unmitigated sentimentality and over-emotionality. However, I argue that the call-response system is a highly complex, fundamentally rhetorical scheme that once critically examined reveals deeply rooted cultural and religious traditions integral to the formation of the African American sermon event.

One function of call-response is as a means by which the congregation displays its approval of the message being conveyed by the preacher. In order to

disambiguate the concept, I will quote Geneva Smitherman's discussion of call-response at length. She asserts that

the dialogue between preacher and congregation (call-response), which begins with the preacher responding to a prior call from God to preach, serves to unify the preacher with his or her audience. In fact, personal communication and observation suggest that Black preachers who do not get congregational responses (e.g. Amen, Das Right, you sho' 'nuff preachin'), will feel a sense of separation from the audience. Either they have "lost" the congregation by speaking "above their heads", or by boring them, or they are presenting material with which the audience totally disagrees. Silence in traditional Black churches is generally not viewed as indicative of a mesmerized or attentive audience; instead it typically carries negative connotations (qtd. in Wharry 205).

Many Black preachers, when speaking to audiences that do not employ call-response, may not feel "at home" and may be uncomfortable with delivering sermons within those contexts. This discomfort exists because, in most Black churches, the audience's responses actually assist in the formation of extemporaneous portions of the sermon, a combined effort of preacher and congregation. Without verbal attestations from the congregation, the Black Church preacher may likely feel as though he/she is not well-received or that an integral component of the sermon event

is conspicuously absent. Accordingly, Mitchell states that “when content and imaginative delivery grips a congregation, the ensuing dialogue between preacher and people is the epitome of creative worship (98). That is, the call-response system serves a generative function in creating the communicative transaction that comprises the preaching event.

I contend that there exists a performative element on the part of the congregation in enacting the system of call-response. That is, there is a level of performance or self-display at play on the part of each member of the congregation who outwardly express their sentiments of approval of the message. Members of the congregation occupy a peculiar subject position in that they “perform” their approval of the preacher’s message. They “perform” perhaps for other congregants (who very well may be engaged in a similar performance) as well the preacher who is engaged in his/her own verbal performance. I find it important to note, that to *perform*, in this sense, does not entail artificiality or affectation, so to speak, but rather carrying out a traditional rhetorical function within this intricate discursive system.

The level of enthusiastic attestation expressed usually directly correlates to the resonance and poignancy of the sermon. According to Mitchell “call/response dialogue occurs characteristically in response to the preacher’s reference to something that is vital to the life experience of the respondent-something he identifies with, something which elicits his asseveration” (97). The viability of the call-response

system hinges on the fact that the members of the congregation feel “at home”.

Mitchell continues in stating that the members of the congregation are interested in what the preacher is saying because “he is involved, crucially involved in the issues as the preacher shapes them with spiritual reference and skillful allegory” (97). That is to say, congregational responses during the sermon event signify that the audience deems what is being said as worthwhile and relatable.

Black congregations often use call-response to either display or withhold (in the form of silence) their approval of the message being delivered. When a preacher makes a particularly affective point or one that resonates with the audience, members of the congregation might offer up a verbal endorsement in the form of an *Amen*, or *Glory*, or simply stand and/or enthusiastically wave a hand in the direction of the pulpit to hearten and encourage the preacher. In order to further demonstrate the operation of the call-response system, I will revisit Bishop Paul Morton’s sermon excerpt explicated in chapter one and further explain the meaning of the congregational attestations deployed therein.

If you’re gonna’ be called to greatness (Audience: alright, yes)
greatness is not going to happen in your life with limits on (Alright). I
need some out of the box folk that are ready tonight to take the limits
(Yes) off. Now could I tell you something and it’s very important for us

to understand this tonight, the key ingredient in taking the limits off in your life is faith (Amen, yes). Somebody say faith (Faith).

Members of the congregation call out *Alright Yes*, and *Amen* in order to uplift the preacher and verbally endorse the message. That is, the audience punctuates Bishop Morton's sermon with exclamations of open approval. To exclaim *alright!* is to express a sentiment similar to *I approve of and relate to what you are saying. Keep talking*. Similarly, exclamations of *Yes!* Communicate that *what you are saying resonates with me*. *Amen* literally translates from Hebrew to English to mean "let it be so", and similar to its denotative meaning, holds a similar confirmative function within the African American sermonic tradition.

Correspondingly, in *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching*, Evans E. Crawford, explains that such phrases as "Help him Lord!" and "Come on now" actually testify to the listener's willingness to allow the preacher to make his or her case and, ultimately, to praise God. "To the uninitiated ear, call and response might appear to be little more than sound and fury signifying nothing", but it is more accurately understood as a rhetorical art that can be mastered by African Americans and appreciated by others outside the tradition (92). The members of the congregation who shout "Amen" and fervently encourage the preacher are often referred to as the Amen Corner. Crawford continues "that the forward movement of the sermon is predicated on the preacher's connection to the congregation. That

connection is measured by the congregational response. Crawford notes five progressive affirmations to guide the preacher: Help 'Em Lord, Well, That's Alright, Amen, and Glory Hallelujah (92). While these are some of the common or trope phrases used to steer the preacher and the sermon itself toward a jubilant climax, there are too many readily employed trope phrases within the African American Christian tradition to list here for the sake of brevity, as many are sermon-context specific. I will, however, further treat some additional trope phrases often deployed during the Black Church sermon event in chapter three of this exposition.

The phenomenon of audience participation is counter-intuitively undisruptive, and in order to not misrepresent the nature of the congregational interjections that occur during the preaching event, it is important to be quite clear upon the following point. The intermittent comments of the congregation rarely overlap or interrupt the preacher's oration. Typically, Black preachers are not disturbed by and rarely outwardly acknowledge these verbal displays of approval. Congregational involvement in shaping the sermon event is so deeply rooted, however, that many preachers subconsciously pause to leave room for the response of the assembly. That is, the preacher's natural presentation style allows for audience response. To clarify, that is not to say that the Black preachers garishly, outwardly pause for exclamations of approval in the current instance, but rather that because call-response is so culturally entrenched that the natural cadence Black speakers often

employ leaves room for the congregation's joyous interpolations. The Black preacher's natural tendency to allow for the audience to chime in with calls of encouragement illustrates that the sermon event is constructed around or even by these verbal exchanges between speaker and audience.

It is important to note that the call-response system cannot wholly be explained as a phenomenon in which the congregation intuitively knowing when to verbally express their encouragement during the sermon without distracting the pastor or disrupting the flow of the sermon. The process is much more involved and intricate than such a conception allows. That is, the preacher or speaker also takes cues from the audience as to how to proceed with his or her oration. This interaction and verbal, visual, and intuitive interplay catalyze the sermon. According to scholar, Gerald Davis in *I Got the Word in Me and I can Sing It, You Know*, "a considerable part of the interaction that goes on between preacher and his or her congregation is visual. Oftentimes, the decision to truncate a line or extend a phrase is made in response to a visual or vocal cue provided by a respected member of the congregation" (11). That is, the audience often directly shapes the sermon moment through both visual and verbal input and feedback.

While, as stated, the more modern definition and constraints of the current context delimits call-response as a form of interaction between a speaker and one or

more listeners, in which an utterance of the speaker elicits a verbal or non-verbal response from the listener or listeners, what one often finds, however, is not always feedback. In some instances, the audience participation precedes the words of the speaker, and according to scholar Lyndrey Niles in “Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching”, many Black preachers admit that they actually respond during the preaching moment to the call of the congregation. Thus, call-response may not be the call of the minister and the response of the congregation; it may be the exact opposite with the audience stimulating (calling) the minister to new heights of oratorical excellence and insightful sermonizing (qtd. in Niles 51). For example, upon hearing or seeing a verbal cue from a member of the congregation, a preacher might extemporaneously expound on a point in order to maximize the positive effect on the audience.

Correspondingly, Black Preachers commonly refer to the verbal responses from the congregation as “help”. For instance, a Black preacher may state “I can’t get no help up in here” to elicit a response from the audience if he or she feels that he or she made a particularly pertinent point that has been seemingly overlooked or at least outwardly unacknowledged. The phrase, “I can’t get no help”, may also be used if the preacher is broaching an unpopular or controversial topic and wishes to make sure that he or she has not lost the concurrence or attention of the audience. The

congregation's likely response to the solicitations for "help" would be an affirmation such as *Yes, Amen, or Preach!*

Similarly, Black preachers often refer to Divine assistance during the sermon moment as "help". That is, many Black preachers subscribe to the notion that God is directly involved with the extemporaneous composition and delivery of the sermon. He or she might say "I can feel my help comin,'" meaning that he or she feels the presence of God taking over the sermon and sanctioning his or her words. Mitchell asserts that "certainly the vast majority of Black preachers assume that *God* will have to help them, both directly and through the congregation's participation in the dialogue, if an in-depth spiritual happening is to occur (105). That is to say, given the extemporaneity inherent in the typical Black Church sermon, the sermon itself is shaped extemporaneously by both congregational contributions and Divine influence. As elaborate exchanges between the pulpit and the pews galvanize speaker and hearer, and the spirit of God is believed to usurp the preaching moment, the sermon event gains momentum and begins to crescendo. An excerpt from *Black English* by J. L. Dillard, referenced in the introduction to this exposition as a seminal work in the field, bears revisiting, here. Dillard describes a typical Black Church service as follows:

The sermon starts, typically with a bible [sic] reading and a discourse on the meaning of the selected verse. As the preacher proceeds the

congregation becomes more and more involved they *bear him up* by calling antiphonally “Das right,” “Sho Nuff,” “Sweet Jesus!,” and “Preacher,” or simply echo part of his words all neatly in his off beats... As the tension builds and the service reaches its rhetorical climax, the responses from the congregation get louder and more fervent, but they never lose the rhythm and timing so peculiar to Black services (Dillard 55).

As the sermon approaches its rhetorical culmination, the communication between preacher and congregation often begins to become more enthusiastic and animated until it reaches a celebratory peak, during which the intensity of engagement is nearly palpable.

Call-response often steers the sermon toward the climactic sense of celebration that is the expectation and one of the ultimate objectives of the Black Church sermon. Mitchell argues that that the preaching event is incomplete if the preacher does not move the sermon into an ultimate expression of celebration. The cacophony inherent in the enactment of the call-response system often ushers in the cathartic experience that is the goal of the sermon event. Niles characterizes the multilayered nature of the call-response system in a manner that serves to clarify the discursive phenomenon. He states that worship and the preaching within the Black Church are meant to be joyful. “The shared experience becomes contagious and the congregation collectively responds to the leadership and communicative skills of the

preacher. Black preaching, therefore, is not simply organization and presentation of religious materials in a lecture style or format” (52). For Niles, the true nature of Black preaching entails more than simply, inertly imparting the tenets of Christianity to a predominantly Black assemblage. Nor are Black Church congregations to be conceptualized as passive listeners awaiting information to be deposited by the preacher. Rather, for Niles the Black Church experience is the “careful orchestrating of the needs of the congregation, the satisfaction of those needs through carefully selected materials related to the congregation’s experiences and presented vividly and descriptively to awaken their highest intellectual ability and touch their deepest emotions (52)”. To expand Niles’ assertions, not only is Black Church preaching concerned with the congregations’ needs and emotions, but Black Church homiletics constitutes a complex discursive exchange closely guided by the conventions of the African American rhetorical tradition, namely the call-response system.

In order for preaching to attain the aforementioned power of *nommo*, participation of the community is essential. Call-response, as it occurs during the Black preaching event captures this dynamic participation through the power of the *word* and its experience. Mitchell maintains that the “emotional participation of the hearers in the celebration of the sermon helps the hearers incorporate the spiritual message into their daily living. When people participate in the preaching event they are more likely to identify and retain meaning. It becomes a holistic experience” (212). The heights of call-response directly catalyze the emotivity and catharsis so

integral to the Black Church experience. However, to be clear, the climactic aim of the sermon event is not simply unbridled emotionality, but serves a hermeneutic function for the hearers. That is to say, the joyous culmination of the sermon brought about by the content of the message simultaneously fosters absorption and internalization of the message. Similarly, Floyd-Thomas argues that as part of the African American sermonic experience, “the worshiper fulfills this special role by engaging in what may be called reflection in action. The worshipers’ response of ‘talking back’ to the preacher is action based on the worshipers listening both to what is said and to the self. This method of involvement of Black worshippers reveals that they are not passive listeners who fail to recognize the flow of language, thought, and the feelings of the pastor, self and others” (192). In this instance, “talking back” refers to the commentative aspect of the call-response system and signifies that the message has resonated with the individual audience member and in turn, he or she plays a role in the sermon moment in the form of “talking back” to the preacher to affirm and attach meaning and significance to the communicative experience.

Apart from the aforementioned renderings of the call-response system and the intermittent verbal encouragement by the Amen Corner, another aspect of the call-response system involves preachers’ engagement in direct dialogue with their congregation.

3.2 Rhetorical Embellishments that Foster Congregational Engagement

As previously discussed, the dynamic between the Black preacher and Black congregation more closely resembles a conversation than the typical speaker/listener relationship predominant in non-Black churches. A specific incarnation of call-response entails verbal cues and addresses originated by the preacher and directed at the audience or congregation. This rhetorical maneuver of outwardly soliciting audience participation effectively garners the congregation's interest and attention. This verbal interaction, as facilitated by the pastor, instills a sense of commonality and cohesion among the congregation and makes the sermon more memorable and the Black preacher is typically aware of this. Below, I will treat some of the varied ways in which Black preachers often attempt to garner participation from their audience in order to effectively relay and promote adherence to the message of the Gospel.

3.2.1 Fill-In-The Blank /Strategic Pause

As stated, it is not uncommon for Black preachers to pause for a breath in order to receive responses from their congregations. Of course, some ministers deliberately pause after an important word or phrase, thereby implicitly calling for a response. At times, they openly call for an "Amen" or other verbal response after a particularly noteworthy word or phrase in the sermon. Usually the reply from the congregation is the echo of the exact word or phrase, or it may be an affirming statement such as "Oh Yes," "Praise God," "Thank You, Jesus," or "Have Mercy." Calculated for rhetorical effect, the strategic pause is a rhetorical tactic used to

engage the audience. It is a method for the pastor to ensure that the congregation has been listening closely and that he/she has not lost their attention. Additionally, the fill-in-the blank rhetorical move excerpted below creates emphasis.

One way in which Reverend Jeremiah Wright employs the pervasive call-response system in his sermons is by pausing to let the congregation finish his thought. The following excerpt comes from a sermon delivered on January 27, 2008; at Wright's Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois. He states that:

I've told you now for over three decades that God will forgive you for sowing your wild oats. But God's forgiveness don't stop the crop. Them oats you sowed will bring a crop. You will reap what you [audience chimes in] sow.

Reverend Wright utilizes the fill-in-the blank tactic fluently here. "You reap what you sow" is a common religious adage within the Black Church, and pausing to allow the audience to participate in constructing the sermon serves a dual function. The obvious purpose for employing fill-in-the-blank as a rhetorical strategy is to ensure that the audience is listening. If the audience is able to provide the missing word, presumably they have been attentive and the preacher knows he/she is maintaining their interest. Also, fill-in-the-blank creates emphasis. By leaving the final word of his sentence to be supplied by the audience, the line is more impactful and is more likely to resonate with the congregation.

The use of strategic pause is not always as blatant as the fill-in-the-blank example above. That is, often, after a preacher has made what he/she deems a particularly resonant point he/she might simply pause and assume a receptive posture, i.e. looking directly out into the congregation or outstretching his/her arms as if to elicit feedback. The audience seemingly intuitively knows to insert their expressions of support and agreement.

3.2.2 Tell Your Neighbor...

Another of the ways in which African American preachers foster solidarity amongst their congregation is through a communicative maneuver I shall refer to as “tell your neighbor”. That is, preachers literally instruct their congregation to turn to the person next to them and speak a prescribed word or phrase. The audience, in turn, responds accordingly. An apt example of “tell your neighbor” as a rhetorical device can be illustrated through a sermon by Bishop T.D Jakes. Jakes delivered the following sermon entitled “Free Your Mind” to his congregation at the Potter’s House on New Year’s Eve 2009. Bishop Jakes asserts:

You have to fix the mind before you can bestow the blessing, because everything you invest in them is going to leak out of the crevices of a mind that refuses to change. Look at your neighbor and ask them, do you have a mind to change? [audience: Do you have a mind to change?] Wait for an answer. If they say no, drag em’ to the altar. Tell ‘em they got ‘til midnight to get that fixed....Woe be unto you if you go

into another year and waste another year with an old mentality while somebody's in the hospital begging God for the opportunity that you have right now. You better *step* into this moment. Lay your hands on your head and say give me a new mind [audience: Give me a new mind]...I will rejoice. Touch three people and tell 'em there's things I'm not taking with me into the New Year... Everything that's holding me back, I refuse to take it over into another year and waste another New Year with an old mind. Am I preachin' right tonight? [Audience: Yes!] ...Somebody tonight is about to get a miracle in your head. Look at somebody and say you don't have to get out of trouble [Audience: you don't have to get out of trouble] Tell 'em you don't have to get out of trouble before midnight. [audience: you don't have to get out of trouble before midnight] You just have to get your mind out of trouble. [Audience repeats].

Bishop Jakes promotes a sense of interconnection among his congregation by directing them to interact with one another by collectively repeating, thereby reinforcing his words. By instructing his audience to "Look at your neighbor and ask them, do you have a mind to change?" Bishop Jakes applies a variant of a kind of peer pressure. That is, when the audience members turn to one another and pose this direct question, each of their answers will presumably be yes as so not to appear divisive or contentious in the eyes of others. The audience echoes the Bishop in

near-unison. *Do you have a mind to change?* After which he jokingly responds, “Wait for an answer. If they say no, drag em’ to the altar”. Bishop Jakes’ jest implies that he is aware that the question he instructs the audience to turn and ask their neighbor will likely be received as a rhetorical question, in the sense that it does not warrant a response. By telling them to wait for a response, he communicates to his audience that the answer to the question is as important as the question itself. Despite his lighthearted delivery in stating “if they say no, drag em’ to the altar,” immediately following with “tell ‘em they got ‘til midnight to get that fixed” sobers the tone of the moment and demands at least a tacit concurrence.

Later in the excerpt, Bishop Jakes instructs his audience to “Look at somebody and say you don’t have to get out of trouble [Audience: you don’t have to get out of trouble] Tell ‘em you don’t have to get out of trouble before midnight. [audience you don’t have to get out of trouble before midnight] You just have to get your mind out of trouble. [Audience repeats].” What Bishop Jakes accomplishes rhetorically, here, is two-fold. He directs the audience to repeat his statements while simultaneously imparting the words to another person. In doing so the repeated lines are more likely to be internalized by the audience as they first listen, then repeat to one another.

Another interactive element that is not to be overlooked is the physicality involved in much of audience participation within the above excerpt. Not only is the

audience instructed to *turn* to his or her neighbor and speak the prescribed words. The audience is told to “*touch* three people and tell ‘em there’s things I’m not taking with me into the New Year”. Similarly, Bishop Jakes directs his congregation to “*lay* your hands on your head and say give me a new mind [audience: Give me a new mind]”. Instructing the members of his congregation to touch one another and later their own heads as they repeat his words fosters engagement with one another as well as with the message of the sermon itself. These dictated physical and verbal activities help solidify the meaning of the message and ensure that it is received spiritually as well as intellectually.

Similarly, Reverend Jeremiah Wright employs rhetorical moves that foster interaction among the congregation while patently drawing attention to the significance and indispensability of congregational interaction. He states:

We make choices and we engage in behaviors-tell your neighbor: Our choices have consequences [echo from audience]. Now, some of ya’ll don’t like talking to your neighbor. You may feel uncomfortable in this world which idolizes isolation, anonymity, and so-called socially constructed privacy. If talking to strangers makes you uncomfortable, throw your head back and say: My behavior has consequences.

[Audience Echos] Our choices have consequences, and our behavior has consequences.

Here, Reverend Wright highlights the purpose behind “tell your neighbor”. In stating “now some of ya’ll don’t like talking to your neighbor. You may feel uncomfortable in this world which idolizes isolation, anonymity, and so-called socially constructed privacy” Reverend Wright emphasizes the sense of interconnectedness brought about by “tell your neighbor” as a rhetorical tactic. He explicitly explains that it is important to combat the societal propensity to isolate oneself, while simultaneously demonstrating this imperative by requiring his congregation to interrelate.

John Rickford discusses in *Spoken Soul* another way in which “tell your neighbor” is utilized within Black Church sermons. He states “when preparing to broach a delicate topic a preacher often instructs his congregation to ‘turn to your neighbor and tell them he’s going there’ then he directed them to ‘turn to the other side and say, I wish he wouldn’t’ (52). This tactic employs humor and interaction in order to ensure that the congregation is on one accord and remains attentive despite the introduction of a potentially sensitive subject matter.

3.2.3 Direct Solicitation of Audience Response

Another rhetorical element intrinsic in the African American rhetorical tradition is the direct solicitation of audience participation. As a separate rendering of the call-response system preachers often engage in a direct dialogue with the congregation often by posing a direct question. Rickford states that Black preachers are famous for

demanding answers to rhetorical questions...Church folk will supply speedy responses to such inquiries; they are obliged to do so for reciprocity's sake. Proper etiquette dictates that when the 'Rev' calls for support one must demonstrate that he/she is following along with the lesson (51).

Reverend Wright seamlessly illustrates this provocative rhetorical tactic. The first example of solicited audience participation through seemingly rhetorical questions comes relatively early in Wright's sermon. He preaches

I want you to look at John 7:2. The Jewish festival of the booths was about to begin. The festival of the booths was celebrated every year as a reminder of the way that God's people had wandered in the Wilderness for 40 years because they wouldn't trust God, and wanted to do things their own way. Does that sound familiar? (Yes) Is anybody going to be honest with God in the house of God on this Lord's Day? Because the people of God would not trust God and wanted to do things their own way, they brought a punishment on themselves, because of their own behavior and their own choices. Let me ask again, is any of this sounding familiar? (Amen) (Wright)

Reverend Wright directly addresses his congregation as a type of regulatory measure. That is, he asks "Does that sound familiar?" as if to verify and ensure that his congregation recognizes the pertinence and relevance of his message. While this may seem like a rhetorical question, in the sense that it does not warrant a response,

this question is posed with the intent to and succeeds at garnering a response from the audience. Yeses and Amens resound. Undoubtedly, Reverend Wright does not intend or allow that his admonishments go unexamined by his congregation as they respond perfunctorily, thus he asks twice whether what he is preaching about sounds familiar in order to drive home the point that he wants his hearers to introspectively examine their own behavior. Wright asks his congregation this question collectively so that the question and answer will resonate with them individually.

Black preachers direct questions to their audience for the purpose of drawing attention to a pertinent point in the message or ensuring that he or she still has the attention and concurrence of his or her congregation. Rickford states that

Black preachers demand participation from their congregations. If they so much as sense a lull, they will not hesitate to ask 'I'm not boring ya'll am I?' or 'How much time I got left?' To which the only proper response, of course, is a hearty 'No sir!' or 'Take your time, Preach!' If an even more enthusiastic response is desired, or the preacher arrives at a particularly transcendental point in the sermon, he or she will drop a hint: 'Somebody ought to say Amen' or 'Let the Church say Amen' (52).

The sermon below delivered by Bishop T.D Jakes further demonstrates the rhetorical purpose of directly soliciting an audience response in the form of a question. Bishop Jakes preaches:

The problem with most people is that everybody they run around with is under them. And so you are forever feeding people who can't feed you. And after years of feeding them they begin to drain you, hunh. You got to have somebody who can feed you, so you can feed somebody else, oh ya'll don't hear what I'm sayin. Am...am...am I talkin' to anybody in here?

Bishop Jakes indirectly elicits a response from his congregation. More specifically, he solicits endorsement and agreement from them. In stating , “oh ya'll don't hear what I'm sayin” he is being provocative in the sense that he wants to emphasize that he has just made a point that is integral to his message which warrants an outward expression of concurrence. It is important to note that “ya'll don't hear me” does not refer to audibility, but rather “relatability”. It is as if to say, *you all are quiet, so you must not agree with what I am saying*. The audience responds to this elicitation individually. Some emit an encouraging exclamation while others simply wave their hands. Similarly, a preacher asking the congregation “am I talkin' to anybody in here?” communicates that the message was intended to be relatable and this question is an inventorial assessment of the aptness and applicability of the message. A noteworthy point to bear in mind, however, is that these interrogative solicitations are not always the result of subdued audience reaction to a pivotal point made in the sermon. Often, a Black preacher will call for attestations in this manner even if the congregation has offered up a hearty response. In this case, questions

such as “am I talkin’ to anybody in here?” serve as a signal that the sermon is reaching its communicative heights and the audience should pay particularly close attention.

Solicitation of audience response, however, is not always delivered in the form of a question. Often, Black preachers mark their particularly poignant remarks or lack of audience response by making a statement that calls attention to the absence of verbal congregational attestation. That is, preachers will pause after a particularly controversial or sobering statement and outwardly acknowledge that they did not receive a verbal endorsement from the audience. Dr. Juanita Bynum seamlessly illustrates this variation of solicitation of audience response in a sermon she delivered to her congregation in 2010. She preaches:

You’ve got to understand that when you’re in the process of transitioning your body from one position to the next and this is a goal that you’re after, you don’t perceive that as pain and hurt. You perceive it as transition, because you’re choosing to go further. I just said somethin’ right there. So, the reason why many of us are going through, you know, things that we’ve gone through is because you done forgot what you told God in prayer...and so the way that you go deeper is by way of transition and so when trial hits you, you don’t start complaining...I didn’t get nobody to say nothing right there...The

reason you can't see the blessing in what God is doing for you is 'cause you too busy complaining...Focus on the destiny, because if you can get the destiny on yo' mind, you gonna' come through this thing in a minute. Aw, ya'll come on somebody!

Dr. Bynum declares, "I just said something' right there" in order to mark for her audience that she has made a pivotal point. This remark indicates that her previous statement is profound and warrants the congregation's contemplation.

Correspondingly, in stating "I didn't get nobody to say nothing right there" Dr. Bynum draws attention to the minimal displays of concurrence from her audience in a effort to communicate that while her remarks did not garner a significant response, her comments are no less pertinent. This statement also implicitly requests verbal confirmation that her audience is still interested and attentive. Similarly, Dr Bynum's pseudo-exasperated utterance, "aw, ya'll come on somebody" serves as a direct cue to her audience that she has made a pivotal point that deserves their outward recognition and affirmation, similar to the aforementioned concept of calling for "help" from the congregation. Words and observable gestures of affirmation from the congregation immediately abound.

3.2.4 Permission to Preach

Another rhetorical tactic employed by many African American pastors and preachers is what I will refer to as "permission to preach". However what I wish to

convey is not that the preacher is literally asking for consent to deliver his or her message, but that “permission to preach” is more accurately understood as pseudo-permission for rhetorical effect to insure the attention and receptivity of the congregation. Bishop Noel Jones aptly demonstrates this rhetorical move. He preaches:

I got to put the Bible down and bring my mind into play to let the world know that because I speak in tongues that don't make me no dummy. I feel like preaching in here, I feel like lifting him up, hunh [audible exhale]. Can I preach like I feel it? If you participate wit' God it'll last longer. The first commandments, hunh, were broken instantly. The second commandments, hunh, are still around. Because when Moses got involved he put the human factor, hunh, with the heavenly factor, hunh. Some of us want the church to be built on prayer, but you got to reach in yo' pocket, hunh, and put yo' money on the table, hunh. That same money, you used to spend in the club, that same money you used to chase the women wit'. That same money, all the sudden you came to church and all [the] sudden ya' got tight. Let the Lord handle it. The Devil is a liar. [The Lord] is gonna' handle it through you. I feel like preachin' now, huh.

Bishop Jones exclaims “I feel like preaching in here, I feel like lifting him up. Can I preach like I feel it?” These statements nod to the aforementioned belief that the presence of God is at least in part responsible for shaping the sermon event. To say “I feel like preachin’ in here” is to say “I feel divinely inspired” to deliver this message. Statements such as these garner a response of lively encouragement and support from the congregation. “Can I preach like I feel it?” as previously mentioned, is not a literal request for permission but rather a notification that Divine inspiration has taken over the sermon event and what proceeds will be unquestionably noteworthy.

One of T.D. Jakes’ sermon excerpts explicated earlier in this chapter illustrates another variant of “permission to preach” that warrants revisiting. Jakes squarely asks his audience “Am I preachin’ right tonight?” to which the congregation collectively replies, “Yes!” While Bishop Jakes is not exactly asking for the pseudo-permission discussed above, he *is* in a sense asking for approval, not solely or necessarily because he is actually questioning how well he is preaching, but to ensure that his audience’s attention has not waned and to foster the interactive, discursive atmosphere so integral to the preaching moment in the Black Church.

I do not present the various renderings of call-response treated above as an exhaustive list of the discursive system’s possible incarnations, but as readily observable renderings of the pervasive call-response system in the Black Church.

CHAPTER 4

BLACK PREACHING AS EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC

As stated in the introduction to this project, one of the goals of this effort is to situate African American sermonic rhetoric within a classical rhetorical context in order to demonstrate their overlap for the purpose of setting forth the study of African American sermonic rhetoric as a pedagogical framework for demonstrating the five rhetorical canons as well as epideictic rhetoric. That is not to say that African American sermonic rhetoric is simply a seamless example, or updated rendering of traditional epideictic rhetoric. Rather, I contend that the cultural awareness and celebratory motives inherent in the rhetoric of Black Church sermons are related to, and intersect many of the rhetorical tenets attributed to Classical epideictic rhetoric. I intend to demonstrate the universality and extant applicability of Classical rhetorical concepts as evidenced by the fact that these principles have emerged in the seemingly unrelated rhetorical arena of African American sermonic rhetoric. I also intend to show that African American sermonic rhetoric, through its emphasis on style, oratorical showmanship, and ornate delivery can be aptly used as a didactic tool to illustrate the rhetoric of praise and blame as well as serve as a pedagogical exemplar for demonstrating all five rhetorical canons.

In many Black Church sermons, distinctively *African American* rhetorical modes are utilized through characteristic style, keen memorization, and vibrant delivery in order to communicate with an African American audience. While I do not wish to insinuate that African American sermonic rhetoric is an appropriation or derivative of Classical Greek rhetoric. I do contend, however, that the sermonic rhetoric disseminated within the Black Church shares sufficient commonalities with the Ancient Greek rhetorical tradition to constitute a tangible, observable example of the modern application of many rhetorical concepts attributed to ancient Greek rhetoricians. In this chapter, I will deploy Classical rhetoric as the critical apparatus by which to examine the overlap and intersections between epideictic, Classical rhetoric at large (including notions of eloquence and *kairos*), and African American sermonic rhetoric. Many Classical rhetoricians and modern rhetorical scholars have treated epideictic rhetoric, several of which I will survey below. In order to juxtapose African American homiletics and epideictic rhetoric, it is first necessary to establish a definition for epideictic rhetoric as it informs the present discussion.

4.1 What Constitutes Epideictic Rhetoric?

Aristotle is often hailed as the father of Classical rhetoric, and according to Aristotle's conception of epideictic rhetoric, or *epideixis*, in his treatise *On Rhetoric*, "the present is the most important; for all speakers praise or blame in regard to existing qualities, but they often make use of other things, both reminding [the

audience] of the past and projecting the course of the future” (48). That is, for Aristotle, epideictic communication is largely grounded in the present moment, and is the rhetoric of a system that constantly encourages the public to adopt a respective ideology. Epideictic, as reflected through modern interpretations, is directly, temporally oriented and concerned with the present moment. That is, epideictic inherently entails a sense of exigency. Similarly, the sermonic rhetoric disseminated within the Black Church is concerned with the present plight of Blacks in America. The extemporaneity involved in the composition and delivery of the sermon attest to the “now-focused” nature of Black Church sermons.

Aristotle only briefly treats epideictic in his treatise, and later rhetoricians have attempted to negate the importance of epideictic oratory and marginalize its importance within the field of rhetoric. Classical scholar, E.M. Cope describes epideictic as “inferior to forensic and deliberative rhetoric because it is demonstrative, showy, ostentatious, declamatory” and has no practical purpose in view (qtd. in Lockwood 96). He remarks that *Epideixis* is Aristotle’s least favored and clearly-defined topic. Now considered to be the matter of ceremonies with its exhortations, panegyrics, encomia, funeral orations and displays of oratorical prowess, epideictic rhetoric is often conceptualized as discourse less about depth and more attuned to style without substance (qtd in Lockwood 96). Epideictic has widely been disregarded within the field of rhetoric as prose for the sake of prose or empty verbiage with self-

display as its sole end in view. In one of the seminal modern works on Classical rhetoric, *The New Rhetoric*, Chaim Perelman and Lucy Olbrechts-Tyteca contend, however, “our own view is that epideictic oratory forms a central part of the art of persuasion, and the lack of understanding shown toward it results from a false conception to the effects of argumentation” (49). Epideictic, often referred to as demonstrative rhetoric is often cursorily conceptualized as the mode of persuasion focusing on the present and having praise or blame of an individual, entity, or group as its primary topic. However, modern rhetoricians such as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca have attempted to expand this understanding of epideictic rhetoric.

Many scholars who acknowledge that epideictic is more than empty prose for the sake of flaunting rhetorical skill still, reductively regard it as solely the rhetoric of play, entertainment, display, including self-display. Epideictic has been fragmentally defined as a social amplification of ideas, things, and people. However, Lawrence Prelli contends in *Rhetorics of Display* that epideictic practice surpasses mere praise and blame, and is more than a showy display of rhetorical skill. He states “epideictic’s understanding calls upon us to join with our community in giving thought to what we witness, and such thoughtful beholding in commemoration constitutes memorializing” (133). He continues, “epideictic rhetoric also calls for witnessing events, acknowledging temporality and contingency” (140). For Prelli, the role of epideictic rhetoric is as an occasion for speaker and listener(s) to disentangle and contextualize

the events of the present. He ascribes a hermeneutical function to epideictic oratory, in that its orations call attention to the events of the current moment and generate and facilitate conversation among witnesses in order to make meaning of the interrelated conditions under which events occur. Prelli's contentions apply seamlessly to the emphasis on interaction between speaker and listener that takes place during the sermon event within the Black Church. Through the use of many varied rhetorical tactics, Black preachers invite their listeners to collaboratively make-meaning of Scripture and apply and interpret Biblical precepts in a manner that informs the African American experience.

Epideictic rhetoric has several purposes, one of which is commendation and observance of virtues and values in a society. Scott Consigny discusses Gorgias' conception of epideictic in the article, "Gorgias's Use of the Epideictic". Consigny argues that for most theorists, epideictic rhetoric is a genre in which the rhetor is given the opportunity to exhibit what Aristotle calls *dunameis*, rhetorical skill or ability. In this conception, the epideictic rhetor differs from his more pragmatic counterpart in that rather than using his/her art to address an audience engaged in legal or political deliberation, s/he displays his/her rhetorical skill before an audience of *theori* who observe and judge that skill. Whereas the pragmatic rhetor is constrained by practical exigency, the epideictic rhetor is at liberty to advocate any position whatsoever, regardless how frivolous, as long as it affords him the opportunity to exhibit rhetorical

prowess (281). This purely Sophistic depiction of epideictic as ineffectual verbal display is reductive, as one of the most oft neglected aspects of epideictic rhetoric is that one of its ends is to incite action in the hearer. That is, epideictic rhetoric is fundamentally persuasive. One of the major aims of epideictic is to catalyze action, observance, or adherence in the hearer. Notions of virtuosity and excellence are established and proliferated in epideictic discourse by extolling certain values and deprecating others. That is to say, epideictic rhetoric is partly constituted by a eulogistic use of language aimed at transforming audience's attention into attitudes. Accordingly, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca contend that epideictic rhetoric has significance and importance for argumentation, as it "strengthens the disposition towards action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds. It is because the speaker's reputation is not the exclusive end of epideictic discourse, but at most a consequence, that a funeral eulogy can be pronounced without a lack of decency, beside an open grave, or a Lenten sermon can have a purpose other than the renown of the preacher"(50). Christian sermonic rhetoric, in general, has a vested interest in extolling godly virtues in order to promote adherence to those values. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca state, epideictic rhetoric "strengthens the disposition towards action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds". Similarly, African American sermonic rhetoric is invested in extolling Godly virtues to encourage Black Christians' adherence to Biblical precepts. I must identify, here, a point of discrepancy with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's assertion that "the speaker's

reputation is not the exclusive end of epideictic discourse, but at most a consequence". I argue, rather, that notions of ethos with the Black homiletic tradition are inextricable from the persuasive element discussed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, ethos and self-display seem to be byproducts of the major aims of epideictic rhetoric. Conversely, within, the rhetoric of Black Church sermons, notions of ethos are irrevocably melded into the fabric of the discourse in a way that preempts discussions of ethos and the aims of the sermon in separate terms.

Traditionally, epideictic rhetoric treats its target audience as spectators. However, one of the characteristics essential to a more modern and comprehensive understanding of epideictic rhetoric is that it, indeed, encompasses social praise, but is not fully constituted by public commendation, instead is intertwined with notions of audience involvement. There is a necessary connection to be made concerning the context of ceremony to the purpose of persuasion, which ethicizes the discursive system in epideictic rhetoric and shapes the audience's attitudes through verbally aesthetic motivation. Conversely, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca contend that "epideictic rhetoric is useful for audiences that are merely enjoying the unfolding of the orator's argument without having to reach a conclusion on the matter in question" (21). This idea is complicated by the fact that Black Church congregations have already reached a conclusion on the validity of sermon topics, as the subject matter

is invariably an aspect of the way in which the Gospel of Christ informs the African American experience. That is, Black Church congregants characteristically lend credence to the sermon as a result of the intrinsic ethos of the pastor and the belief that the message of the sermon is grounded in Biblical principles.

As is evident, integrating Classical and modern notions in order to determine a concrete definition for epideictic rhetoric is inherently problematic. For Aristotle, epideictic is a speech tied to words and high style, providing praise and blame that is to be viewed and beheld. Other delineations of epideictic rhetoric tie it to defining civic values and morality. In the Classical Greek conception of epideictic oratory, the speaker is as important as the speech. The two were interwoven to generate grand words that were a spectacle of oratorical prowess and tested in elocutionary contests. Epideictic as a genre has been as is still viewed as a third rail to the sheer importance of deliberative and forensic rhetoric.

However, a more encompassing conception of epideictic dictates that the epideictic orator is charged with ordering abstract values in order to establish how society should navigate given situations. This conceptions allows epideictic to exist beyond a time and place, it moves epideictic beyond a spectacle of speaker and speech; it becomes a powerful tool in uniting audiences in a cause and to articulating a procession or hierarchy of values. Walter H. Beale, in “Rhetorical Performative Discourse: A New Theory of Epideictic”, expands the role of this rhetorical genre. He

expands Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's definition, claiming that epideictic discourse "demonstrate[s] solidarity—the legitimacy, authenticity, and force of the social, political, or ethnic constituency involved" (243). That is, epideictic is not only concerned with touting certain values but also serves as an "instrument of social upheaval" in that it serves as an interpretive aid and promotes a particular community of interests.

In summation, epideictic rhetoric has three primary characteristics. First, it is a discourse that occurs in a ritualistic fashion. That is to say, it is tied to ceremony, tradition, or exigency that requires a redefinition of civic values. Second, epideictic rhetoric is as much about the orator as it is about the speech. The discourse via values, testimonies, and ethos creates an identity for the speaker. Third, epideictic rhetoric is/can be as important to argument construction, persuasion, and deliberation as the other genres of rhetoric. Epideictic rhetoric is ritualistic discourse in the sense that it celebrates the speaker and the speech and uses relevant values as a serious argumentative form. The Classical epideictic orator, akin to the African American Christian orator, operates out of an intrinsic authority granted him/her through the occasion. Chaim Perelman and Lucy Olbrechts-Tyteca provide an extensive definition for epideictic rhetoric that I will quote at length, here.

the argumentation in epideictic discourse sets out to increase the intensity of adherence to certain values, which might not be contested

when considered on their own but may nevertheless not prevail against other values that may come into conflict with them. The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement. In epideictic oratory every device of literary art is appropriate, for it is a matter of combining all the factors that can promote this communion of the audience. (51).

In accordance with the above definition, epideictic rhetoric constitutes a culturally reflective, present-focused mode of persuasion with motivation to action central to its aims. African American sermonic rhetoric, specifically, however, shares these similarities but has a multivalent aim than can be only partially accounted for by the above definition. I contend, however, that Black Church sermon performances, properly contextualized, stand to serve as a pedagogical example to demonstrate epideictic rhetoric.

4.2 Black Church Sermons as Exemplar of Classical notions of Eloquence

Beyond the junctions between epideictic rhetoric and African American sermonic rhetoric, the study of Black Church homiletics constitutes a comprehensive return of all five Aristotelian canons of rhetoric. African American sermonic rhetoric may be aptly presented as a palpable example to demonstrate the rhetorical theories

concerning eloquence of the foremost Classical rhetoricians. Augustine and other Classical rhetoricians treat eloquence in delivery, which lends itself to the discussion of the emphasis on rhetorical acuity in the African American sermonic tradition. In order to discuss the ways in which Black Church sermons share commonalities with Classical notions of eloquence, I will first review the rhetorical theories of Augustine, Quintilian and Cicero.

In Book IV of *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine acknowledges that the laws of rhetoric are not to be neglected and are especially necessary for the Christian orator and teacher, whom it behooves to excel in eloquence. He purports that the Christian orator can and should employ principles from Classical rhetoric in order to impart the truth of the Holy Scriptures. Augustine was trained in rhetoric before his conversion to Christianity. Thus, when he later applied rhetorical concepts to Christian precepts, he held that every last embellishment should be brought to the service of God, for the glory of Christian doctrine.

Similarly, Quintilian asserts in *Institutio Oratoria* that there exist objective standards of taste and eloquence that all orators should strive for. He holds, perhaps problematically, that in order to be an effective orator, one must also be a virtuous person. Augustine, however, advocates for a truth greater than any purely human kind of morality. For Augustine, truth comes directly from the Divine, and this truth can transcend the vices of the speaker. For Augustine, human understanding is imperfect and limited, thus the Christian orator cannot assume that his hearer will

accept Christian truths unaccompanied by eloquent phrasing. Moreover, the use of rhetorical persuasion is justified by the importance of the message behind it which is, for Augustine, the truth of God. Augustine proposes that eloquence in and of itself is an indifferent faculty, but is valuable only by virtue of making the truth more lucid and palatable to the hearer. He expounds on the Ciceronian idea that “to teach is a necessity, to please is a sweetness, and to persuade is a victory”. That is, pleasure and persuasion are the desirable byproducts of the necessity of instruction. For Augustine, all these gifts are to be sought in earnest prayer from God. That is, the orator should beseech God for wisdom and trust him for divine impartation of truth and eloquence. However, the Christian orator is not to forget to be zealous and diligent in study of the Holy Scripture. This notion that God imparts both truth and eloquence correspond to the widely held belief within the Black Church that God participates in the sermon composition and in its delivery during the “preaching moment”. However, the Black Church preacher must show him/herself to be well-versed in Scripture in order to maintain his/her credibility with his/her congregation.

Comparable to the discursive mores within the African American sermonic tradition, Augustine privileges intelligibility over correctness and states that a speaker should seek cues from his audience that his message has been received and understood, and claims an orator should use the style that will best suit the audience and the topic. Augustine shows, as does Cicero, that there are three levels of style: the subdued, the moderate, and the grand. The first is for instruction, the second for

praise, and the third for exhortation or to catalyze action. Augustine states that these styles may be intermingled, as all of the levels of style have the same end in view, to illuminate the truth for the hearer so that he may understand it, hear it with gladness, and practice it in his own life. Augustine's notions of accessibility in oratory align with the aims of the dialectical and rhetorical embellishments often employed within Black Church sermons. That is, eloquence within the Black Church is not measured by mastery of Standard English Language conventions, but rather how relatable and familiar the wording and phrasing is to the congregation. African American Christian orators often mingle slang, colloquialisms, and AAVE into their sermons in order to establish a sense of connection with their parishioners. The use of informal language and AAVE in Black Church sermons will be treated in more detail in chapter five.

Augustine exhorts the Christian teacher by pointing out that the dignity and responsibility of the office he holds and the emphasizing the charge to lead a life in harmony with his own teaching, and to provide a good example of piety. He stresses that the speaker's ethos or virtuous reputation has more bearing on whether he will be heard with obedience than does the articulacy in his speech. As previously stated, notions of ethos within the African American sermonic tradition are inextricable from discussions of the rhetoric disseminated during the sermon event partly due to the speaker's intrinsic credibility granted by right of his/her office as pastor and perceived calling from God.

Another seminal text in the field of Classical rhetoric which shares assumptions concerning the rhetorical word and “the *Word* in another sense” is *On the Sublime*. Longinus deals with forms of expression that have the power to beguile and entrance the hearer, as opposed to merely pleasing or persuading. For Longinus, sublime passages exude an irresistible force. This power arises not from mastery of technique, as not all technically competent artists are capable of sublimity. Rather, it can only be achieved by those artists who are capable of grand conceptions and are possessed by powerful and inspired emotion, qualities that Longinus attributes to the gods. Combined with technical competence, powerful thought, and favor of the gods, man can produce the sublime.

Similarly, many African American Christian orators profess that before delivering a sermon they seek and receive divine guidance regarding what to say and how to say it, and as previously stated are “helped” by divine influence during the “preaching moment” when the spirit of God is believed to usurp the sermon event and bolster the sermon to its emotive peak. Augustine as well as many modern Christian pastors purport that their words are backed with divine authority and imparted directly from God and thus amount to “more than words” but a direct, divine insight into the true nature of things.

4.3 African American Sermonic Rhetoric as a Rendering of All Five Rhetorical

Canons

Before a sermon is a rhetorical act, before it is a text, it is an enactment in which all three of the Classical rhetorical components are at play: discourse, speaker, audience. Correspondingly, the Black Church sermon event represents a unique rhetorical situation in which all five canons of rhetoric as well as the aforementioned discursive triad are readily discernible in a singular occasion.

In recent history, *rhetoric* has been relegated to a position in which it encompasses only the aspects of style and delivery in public speaking, while invention and arrangement, which are considered the philosophically more meritorious endeavors, have been attributed to the dialectic. Scholar, Peter Ramus explicitly disputes Aristotle and Cicero's work by stating that the dialectic constitutes philosophy and logic, and the only activities to be rightly ascribed to rhetoric are style and delivery. In discussing this downscaled conception of rhetoric, the editors of *The Rhetorical Tradition*, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, assert that "invention and arrangement thus take on new importance, but rhetoric does not benefit from this change because invention and arrangement are no longer part of its domain. Rhetoric, indeed is much diminished, consisting only of style and delivery, and the orator becomes simply a person skilled in speaking, with good style and delivery" (676). Ramus is largely responsible for this denigration of rhetoric in that his pivotal contentions have undoubtedly shaped the modern definition and pejorative connotations tied to *rhetoric* as a term.

Ramus' assertions about rhetoric and his bold disparagement of Ancient and Classical thinkers and what he perceives to be their errors in delineating what constitutes rhetoric has incontrovertibly marked the face of rhetoric. Thus, academia has had to defend rhetoric as a formal discipline, and often the word *rhetoric* carries with it Sophistic connotations that Aristotle and others had once dispelled. However, I contend that the study of African American sermonic rhetoric represents the pedagogical opportunity for the reconciliation of all five rhetorical canons.

4.3.1 Invention

The first of the Aristotelian canons or stages of the composing process is *invention*. The initial process inherent in the invention of a homily to be delivered to a Black congregation is the consideration of the audience. As stated, the Black Church sermon is often composed extemporaneously during the sermon event; however, Black preachers usually generate at least light notes to which they may refer numerous times during their oration. To this point, Davis argues that “the sense of spontaneity notwithstanding, there is ample evidence that many African-American preachers have given considerable thought to their sermon texts days before the sermon is performed. While the preparation may not be as elaborate as writing a sermon, it is clear that a considerable amount of forethought has gone into the text and certain features of elaboration” (73). While, the copiousness of the notes and the degree to which they are referenced during the sermon event will understandably

vary by individual, Black preachers typically have the subject matter and important points they wish to make on the topic readily available as they address their audience.

As has been previously discussed, a widely held belief within the Black Church entails that the sermon event is guided and directed by both audience and Divine involvement. The invention process that takes place before the oration is delivered is believed to be divinely inspired and sermon topic and notes recorded beforehand are constructed around the potential effect on and resonance with the congregation. That is, Black Church preachers often fast and pray in order to beseech God for guidance regarding the message. Many preachers often explicitly attribute their sermon directly to the Divine during the prayer before they begin to preach or at some point during the sermon. It is important to note that Black Church sermon composition is also grounded in biblical scholarship. That is, I do not wish to under-emphasize the diligent study and painstaking consideration that African American Christian orators apply to sermon invention. Furthermore, I do not intend to imply that the sermons are composed solely by divine impartation. Traditionally, Black Church parishioners hold the tacit expectation that the sermon will be based on Biblical principles, therefore knowledge and applicable interpretation of Scripture is integral to the invention of Black Church sermons.

4.3.2 Arrangement/Structure of Sermon

The African American sermonic tradition also exhibits distinctive *arrangement*. Traditionally, there are readily observable characteristics concerning the organization or arrangement of the typical African American sermon performance that can be considered “rules” of the genre. I do not wish to overemphasize the formulaic nature of African American sermon composition or delivery, as it varies widely from speaker to speaker, but there, indeed, exist recognizable commonalities in the flow of many Black homilies.

Davis defines the sermon as "a narrative system which incorporates rationalized sets of conventions and principles designed to support the articulation of existence, belief, and cosmologic considerations in the experiencing lives of African-American people (67)." Davis then sets five formulaic boundaries that occur within the sermon itself, each of which, he argues, must be performed in predefined order:

- A. Preacher indicates that text was provided under divine inspiration.
- B. Identification of the theme of the sermon, followed by appropriate quotation from the Bible.
- C. Interprets, first literally, then broadly, the quoted Bible passage.
- D. Independent, theme-related formulas, developing or retarding a sacred/secular tension and moving between abstract and concrete example. Each formula is an aspect of the "argument" of the sermon.

E. Closure as such is rarely found in the black sermon, but more commonly there will be a brief moment of testimony, or an affirmation of faith by the preacher. (67-82)

While I do not necessarily agree with the fixed chronology Davis places on each element of the sermon, I concur that each formulaic boundary is typical in Black Church sermon arrangement. Davis' framework shows that some preparation (at least regarding theme, and Biblical quotations and interpretations) must take place before the preaching event, as to ensure that the sermon adheres to the tacit expectations of the audience as informed by the African American Christian oratorical tradition. This is not to say that the African American Christian orator employs an outline of the above sort, but rather the "narrative system" organically takes shape through adherence to the African American religious rhetorical tradition.

4.3.3 Memory as it Effects Ethos and Elements of Style

Memory is an often neglected dimension of the composition process in the Classical tradition. However, memorization is a key element in the African American sermonic tradition. Memorization overlaps many of the other rhetorical aspects of the oration. That is, if a preacher constantly reads from his notes or seems to have written the entire sermon, the congregation may well listen, but this will undoubtedly damage the preacher's ethos, as knowledge of the subject matter and ease of delivery are both factors that contribute to the credibility of the Black Church preacher

or pastor. Also, memorization extends to elements of style. That is, memorization is essential to style in that reading from notes is an impediment to the free-flowing evocative style revered within the African American sermonic tradition. The preacher who must read from notes is either confined to the podium, which is not conducive to the demonstrative gesticulation often integral to the sermon event, or he/she must hold notes in his/her hand as he/she moves about the platform which could serve as a distraction to the audience and detract from the message. Therefore, the bulk of the sermon must appear to have been internalized by the preacher and delivered for the collective betterment of the congregation.

4.3.4 Style/ Delivery

While all of the five canons are interrelated, perhaps delivery is most inextricably linked with style, in that typically, one refers to the orator's "style of delivery". The delivery of the message within the Black Church differs from that of its non-black counterparts in that the delivery is interactive. The very manner in which the sermon is relayed to the congregation fosters and encourages audience participation. The sermon is delivered as a combination of performance for, admonition to, and conversation with the congregation. The entire sermon event is a negotiation of sorts in that the audience tacitly grants receptivity and in turn the speaker attempts to sway, inform, and impact them. The audience outwardly gauges the speakers' effectiveness which then often determines how the preacher proceeds.

Also, the rate of delivery in Black Church sermons is typically markedly slower than that of its White counterparts. I contend that this is due to the fact that in the Black Christian oratorical tradition more emphasis is placed on the audience's absorption of the message than the complexity or duration of the message. Black preachers often speak very deliberately in order to allow the congregation to apprehend and weigh each word.

The archetypal Black Church sermon is a carefully crafted, highly stylized, and evocatively delivered rhetorical act. Intensity and fervor are almost always revered. Analogous to conceptions of the performative style and stirring delivery inherent in traditional epideictic rhetoric, many preachers engage in a preening of their rhetorical feathers, so to speak, from the pulpit. Similarly, rhetorical dexterity garners respect and esteem within the Black Church. However, as stated, rhetorical skill is not measured by how well one utilizes prescriptive English grammar conventions, but rather how rousing and relatable the wording and style of the sermon is. This affinity for linguistic proficiency is apparent throughout the African American rhetorical tradition, but particularly in Black sermons.

Black Church homiletics is marked by a communicative style peculiar to African- American culture. Black preachers often employ mannerisms, voice inflections, and paralinguistic elements peculiar to the individual preacher, yet familiar to and accepted within the African American sermonic tradition. Generally, Black

preachers are celebrated for displaying individuality in their preaching style. Provided the content of the homily aligns with Christian precepts and appears to be effortless and natural, rather than forced or cerebral, Black congregations largely welcome homiletic ornamentation during the sermon event. Black preachers often utilize the full breadth of their communicative resources by employing, poetic devices such as repetition, assonance, and alliteration in their language, manipulation of the voice to create emphasis and maintain interest, as well as bodily movements and gestures to animate their words. Combined, these elements minister to and enliven Black congregations with all the rhetorical flair to be expected in non-religious sects of African American culture.

Cicero speaks to this ornate style of delivery in *De Oratore*. He states that in order to master rhetoric “the distinctive style must be formed, not only by the choice of words, but also by the arrangement of the same” (291). He goes on to describe that rhetoric is rousing to the human emotions when mastered effectively. Similarly, word choice is of supreme importance for the Black preacher. He/she must effectively navigate the threefold pull on his/her sermon. The Black preacher must speak divinely imparted words in a manner that is relatable and palatable to his/her audience while adhering to a mode of delivery that is highly revered by that assemblage.

Concurrently, Richard Lischer, argues in *The Preacher King* that “long ago Christianity accepted Cicero’s idea of the purposes of oratory is to teach, to delight, and to move-and although the church was never comfortable with *delight* as an ingredient of the gospel, many preachers settled for delight, not as a means to an end, but as their homiletical end itself” (121). That is to say, the Black Church appropriated a colorful style of delivery as the standard by which to deliver the gospel to its congregations, and Black congregations respond favorably to elaborate stylistic choices by the Black preacher. Rickford argues that “with their repertoire of styles and their passion for pageantry and dramatics, black preachers in the traditional black church don’t merely deliver sermons. They hold court...For the black church, which must reward the sufferings of the stepped-upon and ward off despair in hard times, necessitates men and women who are on fire with the Lord, and who ain’t to proud to perspire when delivering the Word”(39). For Rickford, the highly stylized performative panache with which the Black Church pastor preaches the Gospel has a restorative effect on his/her congregation. As has been previously discussed, the sermon event within the African American homiletic tradition is expected to reach a cathartic height at which the utilization of culturally-specific stylistic accoutrements also peak. Rickford continues, “ministers who can ‘take a text’ from the Bible and ‘break it down’ to the level of everyday people are adored. Intensity and fervor are almost always desired; dead bones preachers need not apply. In the many incarnations of the black church, the Living Word tends to be sung, shouted, clapped

hummed, stomped, and testified in a majestic way that moves and moves and moves” (39). For Rickford, the style of sermon delivery within the modern Black Church is informed by the needs of the congregation in dealing with the struggles inherent in the African American experience. Emotionality and passion in sermon delivery are highly revered and often perceived to be in direct correlation to the preacher’s commitment to his “calling”.

Rickford continues, “the Black preacher must become a maestro of style, appealing not only to the people’s circumstances but their sense of timing, elegance, tragedy, and humor as well...As the Bible is ‘made plain’ and the faithful are swept up in the grandeur of the worship experience, the preacher displays an intimate relationship with Christ and struts his or her own verbal panache” (40). During the sermon event, the Black preacher takes full advantage of an aggregate of vocal and body techniques that overlap class, geographical region, and denominations. However, the range of verbal and paralinguistic techniques used to convey the message of the gospel in the Black Church will be treated later in this exposition.

It is important to note that while authentic renderings of self-expression in the form of rhetorical flair and manifestations of the Black culture idiom are welcomed and commonplace within the Black Church sermon, unmitigated rhetorical flashiness is often frowned upon and regarded as shallow or empty preaching. Stylistic flair that seems garish, rehearsed, or imitative of others is not respected within the African American sermonic tradition. Perhaps this is because the stylistic variations that

occur during the preaching moment within the Black Church are perceived to be at least in part divinely inspired, thus to seemingly feign the move of the Spirit is highly objectionable. Also, stylistic individuality and verbal acrobatics are means by which to emphasize the point of the message, and if these rhetorical embellishments become overly flamboyant and detract from the message itself, African American congregations may become critical of and even discredit such a preacher. These rhetorical embellishments are to be originated during the sermon moment, rather than previously considered or rehearsed and performed on cue.

4.4 Extemporaneity/Kairos

The extemporaneous delivery often practiced within the African American sermonic tradition intersects with notions of kairos or *timeliness* within the Classical Greek rhetorical tradition. Here, I will discuss the notions of kairos as treated by prevalent Classical rhetoricians, as it overlaps the partially improvisational nature of the Black Church sermon. Isocrates states in *Against the Sophists* that the rhetor should “not...miss what the occasion demands but appropriately adorn the whole speech with striking thoughts and to clothe it in flowing and melodious phrase-these things, I hold, require much study and are the task of a vivid and imaginative mind” (74). Part of the spiritual revelry involved in the sermon event within the Black Church revolves around the congregational assumption that the sermon directly speaks to their present needs and concerns. Cicero also speaks to the value of extemporaneity

within orations in his discussion of effective rhetoric in *De Oratore*. He states that the effective rhetor “will also avoid far-fetched jests and those not made up at the moment but brought from home; for these are generally frigid” (341). Both Isocrates’ and Cicero’s notions of *kairos* apply seamlessly to the idea that the Black preacher must anticipate the direction he/she should lead the sermon as he/she delivers it.

Consigny argues that Gorgias grounds his conception of rhetoric as well as his epistemology and ethics in the notion of *kairos*. Gorgias frequently speaks of the importance of *kairos*, a term usually translated as the opportune, the fitting, or the timely and one closely associated with the idea of adaptation to a situation. (284). The Gorgian rhetor, as a skilled craftsman, must be able to discern and accurately respond to the momentary “openings” or opportunities he encounters as a speaker. Similarly, the Black Christian orator must gauge the present needs of the audience as so not to miss the occasion to be impactful through his/her message. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca speak to the value of *kairos* within the Classical rhetorical tradition. They contend that “the spontaneous, unprepared speech, whatever its imperfections, is preferred to the considered, premeditated speech which the hearer considers a device” (451). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also make assertions concerning Divine inspiration that correspond with the widely held belief that God is directly involved in Black Church sermon delivery. They contend “that which is the consequence of an irresistible urge cannot be a process. Thus the writer, poet, or orator will claim to be under the influence of a Muse who inspires him or of an

indignation that inflames him; he becomes the spokesman for the dominating force which dictates his words...the most effective eloquence is the eloquence that appeals to be the normal consequence of the situation” (451). Part of the stylistic appeal of Black oratorical practitioners is the partially impromptu, spiritually led quality of the sermon. Spontaneous references to exigent real-world situations within the sermon event also tend to ground the sermon in the present moment and cause it to resonate all the more with the audience.

In *The Word Made Plain*, James Henry Harris discusses the dialogical nature of the Black Church sermon as he notes, "the congregation expects the preacher to speak as if he or she is speaking from an orality grounded in memory rather than in written discourse. (52)" As previously stated in this project, African American culture is a primarily oral/aural tradition, and in order to be recognized and revered within the tradition Black preachers must appear to speak from memory combined with an instinct for rhetorical panache. Black preaching not only admires, but often demands a talent of improvisation. Overlapping earlier assertions in this chapter regarding memory, According to Cheryl Wharry in the article “Amen and Hallelujah Preaching: Discourse functions In African American Preaching”, traditional African American sermons are typically not fully prepared beforehand and “do not command their value in the context of written literature...While some preachers may choose to write their sermons first, if they wish their delivery of the sermon to be accepted within traditional Black churches, the sermon must have at least the appearance of not

having been finished beforehand; the black preaching event should be constructed by both congregation and preacher, and it should be open to the direction of the “Spirit” (204). As treated in chapter two, and revisited in the current chapter, the sermon event within the Black church is shaped by both congregational interaction and Divine impartation. That is to say, if the sermon is thought to be pre-prepared, it is likely to be thought of a teaching rather than preaching, as preaching within the African American religious rhetorical tradition inextricably entails flexibility to allow for God to guide the message of the sermon.

Another aspect to the appearance of extemporaneity, as stated above regarding memorization, involves the mobility of the preacher. That is, if the preacher is confined to the podium in order to reference his/her notes, the sermon is impeded by the audience’s awareness that the message was at best prewritten, at worst unoriginal.

Scholar, Phillip Sipiora emphasizes in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis* what Isocrates considered a vital component of apprehending kairos, *phronesis*. For Isocrates, *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, must be “coupled with kairos” for there to be “effective rhetoric” both kairos and *phronesis* must be “part of a speaker’s value system as it translates into social action” (9). Sipiora contends that *phronesis* plays two roles. He states, “*phronesis* is necessary for the activation of a preliminary, ‘internal’ dialectic which, in turn gives rise to an ‘intelligence’ that

expresses itself in words and actions. This derived intelligence is based upon a rhetor's understanding of kairos" (9). Isocrates considers kairos one of the essential elements in discourse and emphasizes it as a "dynamic principle rather than a static, codified rhetorical technique" (10). In *Antidosis* Isocrates states that "[T]hose who must apply their minds to [discourse situations] and are able to discern the consequences which for the most part grow out of them, will most often meet these situations in the right way" (qtd. in Sipiora 10). That is, For Isocrates, a rhetor must employ practical wisdom in order to determine the audience appropriateness and timeliness of his arguments in order to succeed in speech.

The Sophistic tradition stresses the rhetor's ability to adapt to, and take advantage of, changing, contingent circumstances. In *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates writes that educated people are those who manage well the circumstances which they encounter day by day, and who possess a judgment which is accurate in meeting occasions as they arise and rarely miss the expedient course of action. Correspondingly, Rickford states that "anyone who has worshipped in an African American church knows that the most exhilarating exchanges evolve unrehearsed as the morning proceeds, and that some of the most prodigious preaching comes after the preacher has folded up notes. Improvisation is a cornerstone of black preaching. Indeed, if the vibrations of worship are to reach a divine pitch some improvisation must occur" (51). In accordance with Rickford's assertions, extemporaneity, indeed, directly informs the all important rhetorical climax of the sermon event within the

Black Church. Often, when the sermon seems to have reached its logical end and the preacher has put away his/her notes, He/she might spring into a spontaneous continuation of his/her message. This type of occurrence is permissible and even encouraged within the African American homiletic tradition, as it is believed that the Spirit of God has seized the sermon event and is directly imparting the unprepared portion of the message.

In addition to the high regard for extemporary sermons, originality is also expected and highly respected within the African American sermonic tradition. Similarly, Isocrates argues in *Against the Sophists* that “for what has been said by one speaker is not equally useful for the speaker who comes after him; on the contrary, he is accounted most skillful in his art who speaks in a manner worthy of his subject and yet is able to discover in it topics which are nowise the same as those used by others. But the greatest proof of the difference between these two arts is that oratory is good only if it has qualities of fitness for the occasion” (73). Accordingly, in addition to considering the needs and concerns of his/her audience, and delivering a sermon seemingly memorized and extemporaneously prepared, the Black preacher must avoid hackneyed ideas or sermons he/she or others have delivered previously. To do so is to damage his/her ethos.

Perhaps the conception of kairos most akin to the timeliness integral to the Black Church sermon is that of Socrates. Socrates' notion of kairos, which I deem worthy of quoting at length, as discussed by Bizzell and Herzberg is as follows

Socrates says that Rhetoric is the art of influencing the soul through words...To influence the soul, the rhetor must know the truth. To know the truth, the rhetor must first make distinctions among things, defining his terms carefully-that is he must analyze- and then he must be able to recombine his ideas in an organic form, in which each part is necessarily linked to what comes before and after- that is, he must synthesize. Thinking and speaking seem to be interrelated here for Socrates. One improves one's thinking by doing the analytic and synthetic groundwork for speaking, and one's speaking cannot be truly good, cannot communicate knowledge, unless it is informed by careful thinking. The rhetor should also apply analysis and synthesis to the subject of rhetoric itself, but not for such purposes as cataloging the parts of a speech. Rather, he should catalog the kinds of human soul so that he can adapt his discourse to whomever he addresses. This is Socrates' version of kairos. (85)

The operative element that allows Socrates' conception of kairos to apply so suitably to discussions of African American sermonic rhetoric is the notion of imparting the

truth. For the Black preacher, the Christian Gospel is the truth and must be diligently studied in order to be an effective Christian orator.

4.5 Emphasis on Relatable Sermon

Another aspect of kairos that extends beyond the originality and extemporaneity involved in the sermon is the exigency of the message. Davis speaks to this point in stating “as the sermon is developed in performance, the African American preacher is constantly under pressure to anchor his text in a contemporary reality. The sermon itself continually shifts in reference frame from sacred to secular, secular to sacred contexts. This tension pulsates throughout the African American sermon and gives a sermon performance a characteristic immediacy and vitality” (84). The Black preacher is ultimately concerned with the relevance of the sermon to the lives of his congregation. As Davis points out, in order to secure the relevance of his message, Black preachers do not feel confined to discuss each topic in a solely religious context. The African American experience is not lived out in a religious vacuum, and Black Church sermons account for this by broaching topics such as politics, race, and interpersonal relationships, among other issues. However, while the immediate topic may be secular in nature, the sermon is at all times tethered to Biblical precepts.

As mentioned, one criterion of a quality sermon in the Black Church is “relatability”. Often, to achieve this level of relevance Black preachers will often revert

to worldly reverences. While preachers may deviate from the language of Scripture, these detours are still viewed as part of preaching the gospel because they make Biblical precepts applicable to the lived experiences of members of the congregation. Often, Black Church preachers will pepper sermons with secular elements in order to emphasize a point. Practical admonishments and advice are often presented in Black Church sermons and seen as commonplace as long as the advice does not contradict Christian doctrine. I will cite Bishop Noel Jones in order to illustrate the emphasis on relevance and exigency in the Black Church sermon. He asserts

Every woman in here, give yo' sista' high five, and say sista' a man don't stay wit' you because of what you give him. Uh huh Uh Huh [pause] I might as well preach it. Excuse me brothas. You can give him a car. You can give him pocket money. You can give him a house and buy everything he want. And while ya' buyin' it you ain't got no respect for him. You give it to him because you love him, but you won't respect him. Uh huh, Uh huh. And before you know it he'll limp out of the house and get him a little woman wit' five babies and you ain't got none. And you're beginning to wonder how could he have left you when you were so good to him, but can I tell you a secret? Huh. Let him buy, yo' car. Let him buy, yo' house. And let him fix, yo' life up and when things seem to be goin' wrong, he ain't gone be in no hurry to leave no house

he paid his money for, to leave no car he paid his money for. He ain't tryna leave, 'cause he had to pay for it.

Outside the proper context, the preceding excerpt may seem anomalous as part of a religious sermon. Bishop Jones makes no Scriptural or theological reference, yet yeses and amens resound, because the audience, namely the women in the congregation, can relate to what is being said. Even the manner in which Bishop Jones prefaces this portion of his sermon by instructing the women in the congregation to “give yo’ sista’ high five, and say sista’ a man don’t stay wit’ you because of what you give him” points to the fact that he is about to broach a topic of practical significance to the women in the audience. He directs the women in the audience to address one another in order to underscore that he is speaking expressly to them. The Black preacher is not barred from making secular references during the sermon event as long as it is evident that he/she includes these references for the edification of the congregation in their daily lives and not simply interested in including gratuitous worldly allusions.

Aristotle contends in *On Rhetoric* that “the rhetor should also consider his audience, in terms of both their particular cultural predilections and their individual emotions, which are conditioned by age and social class (qtd. in Bizzell 31). Correspondingly, as stated, the African American sermon is designed with the participation of the hearers in mind. The time for preaching is a time of invitation to

experience revelation through Biblical exegesis, and it is through concrete relevance that the preacher creates occasion for dialogue.

Another way in which Black preachers insure that their sermon is relatable and palpable to their audience is through the use of ethically specific vernacular. Rhetorical dexterity garners respect and esteem within the Black Church. However, as previously stated rhetorical skill is not measured necessarily by how well one utilizes prescriptive English grammar conventions, but rather how rousing and relatable the verbiage and style used in the sermon is. Likewise, Cicero writes in *De Oratore* that “in oratory the very cardinal sin is to depart from the language of everyday life, and the usage approved by the sense of the community” (291). For Cicero, it is vital to the rhetor’s success to establish a linguistic solidarity with his audience which corresponds with the rationale for Black preachers’ choice to employ AAVE within the sermon event. Alim contends that “Black folks highly value verbal skills expressed orally. Black culture abounds with verbal rituals and rhetorical devices through which this oral linguistic competence can be expressed” (81). This affinity for linguistic proficiency is apparent throughout the African American rhetorical tradition particularly in Black sermons. Alim continues

Black speakers are greatly flamboyant, flashy, and exaggerative; Black [speeches] are highly stylized, dramatic and spectacular. But black communicative performance is a two way street, and so the audience

becomes both observers and participants in the speech event. With its responses, the listeners can influence the direction of a given rap and at the same time acknowledge (or withhold) their approval depending on the linguistic skill of the speaker. No preacher can succeed if he's not a good talker. (Alim 81)

Some of the most interesting and distinctive features of AAVE are to be uncovered in the kinds of expressions exclusive to African American discourses "considered unsuitable for drawing rooms where hegemonic, Eurocentric norms prevail, but accepted without comment even with satisfaction by those who have been entertained and enlivened by black talk" (Spears 101). Often Black preachers will use slang and even some mildly provocative language to emphasize a point. While the looser standards on what is permissible in Church sermons might seem inappropriate to those unfamiliar with the mores of the Black Church, within the African American rhetorical tradition comments are simply regarded as expressive. An extensive treatment of the origin, uses, and functions of AAVE will follow in chapter four.

4.6 Tropes within Black Preaching

In the Classical rhetorical tradition, arguments are obtained from various sources of information, or *topoi*. *Topoi* are categories that help delimit the relationships among ideas. Aristotle divided these topics into "common" and "special"

groups. Commonplace topics provided orators with a reserve of familiar material to which audiences often responded positively. Similarly, within the African American sermonic tradition, preachers often employ filler tropes or phrases to which their audience invariably responds encouragingly. Bishop Noel Jones preaches

I represent God in my home, and I represent God in my society. That's where we have gone wrong. We just sit back and wait until the government does it. The devil is a liar. You have the power of God in yo' spirit, huh. And yo' mind ain't no less than anybody's mind that's outside the church. And I'm sick and tired of church people wanting me to pack my mind up and leave it in the cloak room. That's why you can tell me anything. The devil is a liar, huh. How am I gonna' be the next Bill Gaites by simply sittin' at home with a bible in my hand, huh. The devil is a liar.

Bishop Jones repeats the filler trope "the devil is a liar" several times throughout the above excerpted sermon. It is important to note that while most (if not all) of the denominations treated in the present discussion subscribe to the belief that Satan as an entity exists and actively works against the progression and advancement of Christian principles, the phrase the "devil is a liar" in the rhetorical sense communicates with fervor that what is being said is true and anything to the contrary constitutes a lie. More specifically the trope phrase "the devil is a liar" is meant to

serve as a textual marker to negate false doctrine or faulty beliefs. Each time that Bishop Jones exclaims “the devil is a liar” it follows a spiritually deficient idea that he wishes to dispel. He states, for example “we just sit back and wait until the government does it. The Devil is a liar” as if to point out that it is defective spiritual doctrine to be passive regarding governmental affairs. Similarly he states “the devil is a liar after he asserts that “And I’m sick and tired of church people wanting me to pack my mind up and leave it in the cloak room. That’s why you can tell me anything.” This signals that it is again not spiritually sound for one to allow others to think for him or her. Lastly, “the Devil is a liar” follows Jones’ rhetorical interrogative, “How am I gonna’ be the next Bill Gaites by simply sittin’ at home with a bible in my hand?” That is to say, without intellectual exercise the Christian will remain stagnant.

Typically, the audience members respond to these types of trope statements with an outward exclamation of agreement or encouragement. There are many words and phrases that emerge as filler tropes within the African American sermonic tradition. Some of which are Amen, Hallelujah, Praise God, Thank you Jesus, among others. Tropes and aphorisms hold great currency within the African American sermonic tradition, as they speak to the religiosity of the speaker.

I do not present the above list of tropes as an exhaustive treatment of the tropes employed within African American Church sermons, nor as a critique of the spiritual/religious legitimacy of these tropes. That is, I do not wish to insinuate that

these or other religious tropes within the African American homiletically tradition are recited perfunctorily. I wish, solely to demonstrate their similar function as analogous to the Aristotelian construction of *topoi* and emphasize the largely under-researched filler tropes used in many Black Church sermons.

Wharry examines the discursive function of several religious expressions such as Amen, Hallelujah, Yeah Lord/Hey God, and Bless God among others. Wharry's work concerning religious expressions is unprecedented, and inextricable from a discussion of religious tropes in Black Church sermons, therefore I will cite her at length, below. She finds that the function of these expressions most commonly serve as a textual boundary, Spiritual Filler, or Rhythmic marker. She states, "only once did a preacher use expressions like *Will you say Amen?* for the purpose of eliciting a congregational response. General observations suggest that even though different audience members choose different expressions to confirm their agreement with the preacher, the varied utterances serve a similar purpose that allows for joint production of the preaching performance. Wharry continues, "multiple functions exist for religious formulaic expressions in African American sermons, and that identification of these roles requires both textual and discourse community knowledge... The use of Amen, Praise God, and similar expressions as spiritual maintenance fillers is connected with the importance of "sounding spiritual" and the strong preaching/teaching distinction in this particular religious discourse community"

(223). That is to say, in accordance with the mores of the African American Christian rhetorical tradition, the preacher and congregation must display oral-traditional features some of which are aided and/or represented by formulaic expressions).

Wharry argues that one must be acculturated into the rhetorical conventions of Black Church sermons in order to recognize and differentiate between the uses and purpose of formulaic expressions during the sermon. While a preacher may say *Praise God* numerous times during his/her homily, Wharry contends that the function may vary each time. She continues “Clearly the most common function of *Amens* was to signal textual boundaries (69%). This again points to a similar function of “sounding spiritual” while performing a different function-in this case, alerting the congregation to coming changes in discourse topic or returns to previous discourse” (223). “Sounding spiritual” is an essential aspect in a preacher building and maintaining his/her ethos. Correspondingly, Wharry continues. “preachers could choose to use more secular cohesive markers (e.g. *on the other hand, in contrast, however*), but although these mark boundaries, they do not reinforce the spiritual tone of sermonic discourse as do religious expressions such as Amen and Hallelujah” (223). She states that such phrases serve as maintenance fillers and likens the use of such religious phrases such as Amen and Praise God to the use of *Um* and *you know* in secular speech. She contends that the purpose of employing religious sounding maintenance fillers is to uphold the spiritual tone of the message.

Wharry continues that “significant function appeared on the surface to be simply a verbal filler, but these expressions actually functioned not only to give preachers time to think about their next statements or to fill space while members of the congregation were ‘caught up in the spirit’. Here, preachers’ choice of religious formulaic expressions instead of such secular and typical pause fillers as *uh* suggests a function of maintaining spiritual discourse during these moments” (211). She refers to these markers as spiritual maintenance fillers and claims that “rhythmic markers...reinforce the importance of preachers’ establishing a rhythmic balance both within the sermon itself (as an individual performer) and with the audience (as co-performer)” (211). This function, perhaps more than others, shows the importance of discourse community knowledge for comprehension of the roles formulaic expressions can have.

Setting forth Black Church sermons as a pedagogical tool in order to demonstrate epideictic, the five rhetorical canons, *kairos*, and other Classical rhetorical concepts, works both in theory and in practice. That is, given the ubiquity of sites like YouTube, Black Church sermon broadcasts are readily available for students to view, explicate, and examine the enactment of rhetorical concepts firsthand. Indeed a visual, modern exemplar of this sort will undoubtedly augment rhetoric pedagogy.

CHAPTER 5

PERFORMATIVITY AND RHETORICAL LICENSE

It is undeniable that there are often marked differences between the worship practices and modes of delivery of sermons in Black churches and that of their non-Black counterparts. In order to fully discuss the rhetorical traditions peculiar to the Black Church, it is first important to note the marked cultural difference that often show up in African American communicative practices at large. Theresa Redd, contributor to *Delivering College Composition* asserts that “African Americans have inherited a rich rhetorical tradition, rooted in the cultures of Africa and cultivated in the streets and churches of Black America” (79). African Americans often display a culturally specific communicative competence, or manner of communicating and apprehending information. African Americans often employ a linguistic and rhetorical repertoire peculiar to the Black community. Spears, states that “*Black style, the Black Aesthetic, Black performativity* are three terms among others that have been used to capture the most significant interconnected themes throughout African American culture” (101). Spears defines performativity as the “stylistic dramatization of the self that individuals infuse into their behaviors” (104). That is to say, African Americans often communicate with one another in a manner in which full inclusion in the Black community is necessary for complete comprehension and meaning-making. Spears

contends that “ways of speaking best illustrate elements of style, and more broadly, dispositions in self-presentation. For example we note the remarkable use of *improvisation* in Black ways of speaking, a quality often noted in writing on Black music, in cuisine, and in playing sports. The term semantic license is relatively straight forward. It refers to freedom AAL [African American Language] speakers exercise in creating neologisms, or new words” (226).

African American speakers often exhibit marked freedom concerning word choice and overall presentation of ideas. In addition to Spears’ contention concerning semantic license or the free expression exhibited in coining new words or appropriating the meanings of words to establish new meaning, I contend that African Americans exhibit a *rhetorical* license. That is to say, many Black speakers not only take liberties with manipulating meanings and uses of individual words but often employ a linguistic repertoire that bends and personalizes the whole of communication. Rhetorical license should not be construed as benign oratorical adornments, but rather, I contend that these discursive predispositions are essential hermeneutic threads in the fabric of African American communicative consciousness. Rhetorical license is the display of one’s ability to finesse language and negotiate phrases to creatively and effectively communicate with his/her intended audience. Black semantic and rhetorical license in communication includes pronunciation, word play, lyrical devices, and many other rhetorical embellishments. African American orators fully utilize each communicative element at their disposal in order not only to

display the whole of their ideas, but tacitly, simultaneously display the self. In no facet of the Black experience is this phenomenon more evident than within the Black homiletic tradition. Concurrently, public intellectual, Michael Eric Dyson states in the *Michael Eric Dyson Reader* that “Black preachers coin phrases, stack sentences, accumulate wise sayings, and borrow speech to convince black folk, as the gospel song says to “run on to see what the end is gonna’ be” (206). To clarify, the display of self within the context of African American communicative patterns pertains to the speaker using the full breadth of his/her communicative arsenal to convey meaning about the subject at hand and, albeit implicitly, the depth of his/her rhetorical prowess, creativity, and cultural consciousness.

Each time a Black preacher/pastor addresses his/her audience, whether it be a congregation of two or two-thousand, his reputation is at stake, so to speak. Verbal acumen is highly valued in the Black community and Black speakers generally recognize that their audiences, even in the most informal settings, are judging their performance based on their linguistic acuity. However, word choice and phrasing do not account for the whole of rhetorical skill as determined by the African American rhetorical tradition. Non-verbal elements of communication, or paralinguistics, account for the remainder of the communicative cache that many African Americans have at their disposal for the purposes of public discourse.

Paralanguage refers to the non-verbal elements of communication used to modify meaning and convey emotion. Paralanguage may be expressed consciously or unconsciously, and it includes the pitch, volume, and intonation of speech. The space of performance within Black Church sermons is communal, a theater of commemoration, and a scene for religious creativity. The following section will discuss the varied ways in which performativity, paralinguistic communication, and rhetorical license comprise the performative aspect of the sermon event within the African American homiletic tradition

5.1 Black Religious Paralinguistics and Performativity

While Black Church sermons reflect deeply rooted theological doctrine and spiritual sentiments, I contend that there is a level of performance associated with the typical Black Church sermon. These performative features serve a highly significant rhetorical and communicative function and resonate with the audience or congregation. There are many varied manifestations of these sacred theatrics within the African American homiletic tradition. Rickford contends that “congregations and preachers alike are governed by a spiral of conventionalized social cues-both spoken and acted out-within the worship service. The minister sets the spiral in motion by using one or more of the evocative rhetorical tools available, or by overtly seeking feedback from the congregation (Can I get a witness?). Worshippers receive the message and respond (by standing, clapping, testifying, waving, stomping, nodding their heads, ...or letting loose to a Hallelujah)”(50).

In accordance with Rickford's assertions, the sermon event within the Black Church is a highly systematized rhetorically scheme. While, to the uninitiated parishioner, there may seem to be no limits placed on the types of self-expression that manifest during the sermon event, the sermon event itself is actually standardized or tacitly regulated by traditional Black discursive modes. That is, the sermon event unfolds as a meaningful, festive exchange in which only certain types of solicitations and addresses from the preacher and certain types of responses from the congregation are permissible. I do not wish to overstate the prevalence of enforced order within the Black Church sermon, but I also do not wish the proceedings of the sermon moment in the African American Christian tradition to be misconstrued as an unmitigated melee of emotionality. There exists within the Black Church a realm of acceptability, so to speak. That is to say, there are conventions of behavior within the Black Church dictated and prescribed by both Christian precepts and African American cultural mores. Within the confines of these acceptable conventions, nearly any form of spiritual or self-expression is permissible, each member of the congregation is at least tacitly aware of these conventions and readily adheres to them. For example, during the sermon event, a member of the congregation cannot simply call out any phrase of his/her choosing to show his/her commendation. That is, if a member of the congregation calls out an expression other than a traditional trope phrase, therefore outside the confines of acceptability such as "you are such a good preacher!", he or she would be deemed inappropriate.

Foremost, because this attestation is too lengthy and runs the risk of interrupting the flow of the preacher, and secondly, this exclamation varies too greatly from the approved trope attestations within the Black sermonic tradition. Rickford illustrates this point seamlessly as he states

If the spiral peaks during the sermon and is sustained through the benediction, the pastor may remark that the spirit of the Lord 'has taken hold of the church. But do not be misled. No gesture from pews or pulpit is ever superfluous, or made for sport. A subtle order exists, even amid the apparent frenzy. It is always understood, for example, that the preacher's fundamental role is to explicate the Bible. While the congregation's fundamental role is to back up and build up the preacher. Such unwritten rules of behavior are learned over time as children are raised in the church, watching their mothers testify and their fathers say Amen. (50)

The sermonic style as delivered by the preacher and mode of response from the congregation are implicitly regulated by the mores and traditions of the Black Church and lends a sense of order to the seemingly chaotic climax of the sermon event.

As stated, performativity within the African American sermonic tradition refers to the presentation of self that includes individual style, self expression, and display of rhetorical skill. However, performativity also entails the demonstration and occupation of preexisting roles set out by the expectations of the audience. That is,

the sermon event is not a forum in which wholly unbridled self expression is permissible, rather Black preachers occupy a subject position in which they are expected to “act out” the gospel and make plain and palatable Scriptural precepts. Black preachers are simultaneously “performing” several varied tasks. They are, simultaneously, displaying their own spiritual acumen and biblical understanding, serving as a conduit between the congregation and the Divine, and displaying their own communicative prowess while remaining relatable to their audience. The Black preacher him/herself is on display and his/her every action while occupying this subject position is communicative.

Floyd- Thomas argues that “performativity refers to the rhetorical strategies employed in sermon composition with particular attention to delivery, with the goal of provoking or inspiring response, dialogue, and participation from the congregation” (254). The display of self inherent in performance, coupled with the standards of presentation within the African American sermonic tradition bring about the rendering of the sermon event peculiar to the Black Church. Davis speaks to the standards of presentation within the African American Christian tradition. He states

African-American narrative performance is guided by concepts of *ideal* forms and *ideal* standards. The notion of an ideal form is as compelling for the African American performer as it is for his or her audience.

During a performance, when both ‘performer’ and ‘audience’ are actively locked into a dynamic exchange, the audience compels the

performer to acknowledge the most appropriate characteristics of the genre systems-the 'ideal' in terms of that particular performance environment-before permitting the performer sufficient latitude for the individuation of his genius and style. It is the mechanics (26).

For Davis, Black performance constitutes an acknowledgment, by the speaker and audience alike, of the standards of the genre being performed. Before a speaker or preacher begins to perform his/her oration he/she must recognize the standards for performance already set in place and accepted by the African American rhetorical tradition. While individual style, as has been stated, is welcome and even encouraged within the Black Church, there still exist unstated standards regarding the nature and quality of the orations according to the predetermined standards of the tradition.

As discussed in chapter two, the sermon event within the Black Church is expected to reach a cathartic, emotive climax. It is significant to note that quite typically Black church sermons begin in a rather subdued manner in which Black preachers enunciate quite clearly, perhaps even exaggeratedly and many of the lyrical and poetic devices treated here do not emerge until the sermon reaches its climatic stages. That is to say, as the momentum of the sermon builds so does the use of rhetorical accoutrements that engender this energy. Characteristically, the livelier the sermon and congregation grow the more likely the preacher is to begin to solely employ AAVE. Additionally, Black preachers exercise rhetorical license and

begin to intermingle several rhetorical tools. J. L. Dillard describes the Black Church sermon, “the preacher proceeds, more or less in the language of the Bible and of spirituals, but adding his own individual touches. He easily slips into the words of a familiar song-or perhaps he is sometimes singing. There is, at this point so much excitement that it is almost impossible to tell. (55) In other words, the climax of the sermon event is marked by, if not brought on at least in part by, the use of rhetorical adornments peculiar to African American discursive practices. Below, I shall delineate and treat some of the rhetorical designs, tactics, and use of rhetorical and semantic license that color many Black Church sermons.

5.1.1 Rhythm/Cadence

Rhythm, in this case, pertains to the irregularity of sermon lines made musical through emphatic repetition, dramatic pause among other elements that will be discussed below. Smitherman praises this rendering of rhetorical deftness, calling them displays of rhetorical dexterity linked to functions of tonal semantics. She argues “tonal semantics...refers to the use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in black communication. In using the semantics of tone, the voice is employed like a musical instrument with improvisation, riffs and ...playing between the notes. This rhythmic pattern becomes a kind of acoustical phonetic alphabet and gives black speech its songified or musical quality” (qtd in Rickford 47). Smitherman discusses, here, the widespread tendency within African American rhetorical tradition

to allow inflection and tone to carry and convey meaning more prevalently than in non-Black verbal systems. The African American sermonic tradition is alive with markedly Black discursive modes that largely rely on tone and voice inflection to assign meaning and significance to what is said.

Rickford contends in the chapter of *Spoken Soul* entitled “Preachers and Pray-ers” that “the chanting of the phrases, the rich modulation of the voice, the variations in tone and tempo, the metrical beat, and the stress patterns and intonations must be heard to be appreciated” (43). I agree with Rickford’s assertions that the aforementioned lyrical devices “must be heard to be appreciated”. Therefore, I find it necessary to mention that I recognize that the tonal variations often employed within Black Church homiletics are ideally discussed via an auditory or audio/visual medium. However, I deem paralinguistic elements so integral to the discussion of African American sermonic rhetoric that I include analysis thereof here, while fully acknowledging that these features may not be aptly demonstrated in a written medium.

Cadence refers to the natural rising and falling of the rhythms created by the spoken word. I contend that there exists a markedly Black cadence that is readily recognizable by those inside and outside of the Black community. That is to say, Black preachers employ a cadence and innate rhythm in their orations that is unmistakably and uniquely African American. Niles contends in “Rhetorical Characteristics of Black Preaching” that “one of the very noticeable skills of the Black

preacher is the use of cadence. This characteristic is probably as prevalent among highly trained Black ministers as it is among the storefront clergy. It is effective and adds a degree of credibility to the speaker. Dr. Martin Luther King's cadences were essentially Black. Despite his formal training and language, his national status and reputation, he was heard as a soul brother, as a down-home Baptist preacher." (51) Perhaps, the cadence and rhythm employed by Dr. Martin Luther King is the most readily identifiable and recognizable example of markedly Black oratorical cadence. For Niles, Black cadence is so deeply engrained in many Black orators and preachers that it defies educational level, training, and experience.

Cicero addresses the significance of rhythm and cadence in the effectiveness of orations. He claims in *De Oratore* that "the truth is that the poet is a very near kinsman of the orator, rather more heavily fettered as regards rhythm, but with ampler freedom in his choice of words, while in the use of many sorts of ornament he is his ally and almost his counterpart" (299). Cicero grants that poeticism and oratory are akin to one another and that it behooves the rhetor to command the use of rhythm and employ a melodic cadence. Furthermore, in *Orator*, Cicero discusses the stylistic considerations and cadence of an effective rhetor which works seamlessly into a discussion of Black Church homiletics. He argues that the orator "should avoid so to speak cementing his words together too smoothly, for the hiatus and clash of vowels has something agreeable about it and shows a not unpleasant carelessness on the part of a man who is paying more attention to thought than to words" (340).

Cicero's contention corresponds with the stylistic standards of Black church sermons and the vacillations between euphony and cacophony inherent in the natural rhythm of many Black speakers. Cicero continues in *Orator* that "words when connected together embellish a style if they produce a certain symmetry which disappears when the words are changed, though the thought remains the same" (340). That is, Cicero lends a communicative quality to rhythm, in that he asserts that words seem to assume new nuances of meaning when delivered melodiously. Rhythm is regarded as a fundamentally organic component of Black Church sermons. Davis asserts that in sermon performance, the African American preacher is principally concerned with the organization and the language of his sermon. "The notion of meter in the sense of a rhythmic, mnemonic environment for the logical, pragmatic development of ideas, is not subordinate to the language focus. Rather, it is concurrent with it. The generation of structures for language usage and the structuring of rhythmic environments for the preacher's message are complementary, synchronized processes in the performance of African American sermons" (51). That is, the performance of the sermon event involves a cadence and rhythm often intrinsic to Black speakers, and the markedly Black cadence and rhythm arises organically as the sermon ensues. For Davis, the Black preacher does not have to consciously construct, or calculate the rhythm and cadence of his/her orations, but that this takes place naturally and contemporaneously with the generation of content.

5.1.2 Tone/Pitch Variation

Many preachers within the Black Church assume an authoritative voice throughout their sermons. Much of the message is presented as an admonishment to the congregation and at times assumes a scolding tone. However, Black preachers often vary intonation, volume, and pitch within sermons in order to create emphasis, fully express themselves, and convey the message of the gospel with fervor. J. L. Dillard underscores this point in his contention that contends that Middle-class black communities have, as frequently noted, closed the gap by assimilation. In the rural and storefront churches, however, kinesics (the characteristics of body movement) and paralinguistics (qualities of the voice such as harshness, raspiness, or softness) are unlike the nearest white equivalents in at least some particulars. (45) Dillard cites Anthropologist Alan Lomax as he observed a nineteenth century Black slave sermon and was quoted as saying, “the phrases come like rifle shots. The voice rasps the nerves like a file. Gasping intake of breath after each line. People shouting, women screaming. Pandemonium” (qtd. in Dillard 48). Lomax obviously observes the slave church service with an unsympathetic, biased interpretation, but his adverse reaction speaks to the dissimilarities between the vocal and paralinguistic embellishments observed in White churches and those celebrated and practiced within the Black Church.

Another paralinguistic tool that Black preachers often employ is intonation.

Perhaps the most important thing that can be said about intonation is that it cannot be used effectively unless it is the natural style of language of the speaker. To use it insincerely as an easy means of access and manipulation is to run the risk of failure as well as to belittle and degrade the Black preaching tradition. Mitchell argues that “sustained tone is used in various ways. Some Black preachers use it only in climactic utterance, of whatever length. Others...tend to use some degree of tone throughout the message. Still others use it only in places where the culture of the congregation clearly demands it” (164).

5.1.3 Gravelly Voice

As stated, the rhetorical phenomenon of gravelly voice, and other tonal variations used within many Black Church sermons, is not easily explained or demonstrable through a written medium. However, the practice is inextricable from a discussion of paralinguistic adornments common to the African American homiletic tradition. According to Rickford one of the “calling cards of the traditional black preaching style includes deliberate stuttering or the manipulation of the voice texture and inflection to produce a grating, gravelly, or mellifluous tone’ (48). This grating tone is perhaps partially explained by the “work ethic” of the preacher, which I will discuss more in depth in the following section over gesticulation. Gravelly voice is a raspy tone that connotes that the preacher is straining and groping after divine revelation in order to produce the message of the Gospel.

Dillard notes that “the extreme feature, a vocal rasp that makes an outsider wonder how such a man can survive one sermon, much less preach again, is sometimes called gravelly voice” (55). This low gruff tone is also generated to create emphasis and highlight a point in the sermon. This intention is mutually understood by the audience and this gravelly voice often garners a positive reaction from the congregation. The preacher does not overuse this intonation and typically waits until the climax of the sermon to employ it.

5.1.4 Gesticulation

The sermon event within the Black Church is not a passive occasion. An aspect of the African American religious tradition includes the notion that that preacher appears to be ‘working’ at preaching the gospel. Black preachers strain, stretch, and labor both their voices and bodies for the sake of a/effectively imparting the gospel to their congregation. That is, it is regarded as estimable to *toil* after salvation so to speak, and the representative *labor* during sermon delivery garners the sentiment that the preacher is dutifully invested in the spiritual well-being of his congregation. Scholar Michael Eric Dyson fluently speaks to the fervent gesticulation inherent in the delivery of many Black Church sermons. He argues that

The preacher is the magnificent center of rhetorical and ritualistic gravity in the Black Church, fighting off disinterest with a “you don’t hear me” begging for verbal response by looking to the ceiling and drolly

declaring 'amen lights', twisting his body to 'reach for higher ground' stomping the floor, pounding the pulpit, thumping the bible, spinning around, jumping pews, walking benches, climbing ladders-yes literally-opening doors, closing windows, discarding robes, throwing bulletins, hoisting chairs, moaning groaning, sweating, humming, chiding pricking and edifying, all to better 'tell the story of Jesus and his love' (180)

No list of sermonic features can fail to take into account perhaps the most distinguishing markers of the performance of African American sermonic discourse: facework, gesture, pacing, and physical audience-speaker interplay, as African American preachers often use their entire body to convey meaning.

As Dyson points out in the above passage, Black preachers often physically display actions as they verbally signify them. The physicality involved in preaching according to the African American Christian rhetorical tradition enables the Black preacher to animate his orations and paint a more vivid picture of his/her Biblical exegesis. These demonstrative gestures usually garner enthusiastic response from the audience, perhaps because as alluded to previously it speaks to the rhetorical work ethic of the preacher. That is to say, the preacher is laboring in the sense of using his/her body as an instrument to further explicate the text and drive home the point of the message for the congregation.

Cicero recognizes the significance of gesticulation in oratory. He states in *De Oratore* that the speaker's delivery needs to be "controlled by bodily carriage, gesture, play of features and changing intonation of voice" (291). Black congregations tend to enjoy gesticulations which are unplanned, spontaneous, and natural. Planned gestures run the risk of coming across as premeditated, as they are likely to be just a bit ill-timed. Mitchell contends Black-culture Christians tend to enjoy mannerisms, provided they are natural and overworked. They add interest and signal an authentic personhood in which the congregation participates vicariously. "The Black-culture preacher does not have to develop a striking mannerism or trademark in order to be accounted as Black, but it is certainly not a handicap if he happens to engage in strange and colorful action peculiar to himself alone. Individuality is celebrated, and acceptance is communicated to the congregation in a way enjoyed by all who have not bowed a knee to the Baal of white conformity" (66).

Mitchell discusses the tendency for some Black preachers to develop trademark mannerisms that they perform from the pulpit or make gestures that are not necessarily utilized for the sole purpose of conveying meaning. That means, for some Black preachers elaborate gesturing or bodily movements are more so a means for them to express themselves and their individual preaching style. For example, some preachers may loosen their tie as the sermon climbs towards its rhetorical heights while others may pace the floor of the platform while delivering the pinnacle message of the sermon.

Rickford also discusses the ubiquitous use of elaborate gestures within Black Church sermons. He states “Grace Sims Holt dedicated an essay to the black preacher’s gift for ‘stylin’ out in the pulpit’. By stylin, she means the process of strutting back and forth behind the pulpit with hand on hip or on the small of the back, or firing up a congregation by ‘stomping out the devil’ with a polished wingtip heel, or ‘tearing down the gates of hell’ with a violent kick’ (48).

I find it necessary to differentiate between gesticulations during the sermon event as it is demonstrative of the corresponding words and enhances the meaning of the message, and gestures for the purpose of performance and self-display. However, that is not to say that the two are mutually exclusive or that the latter is less significant, as each type of gesticulation has roots in the African American homiletic tradition and is mutually communicative. Other common gesticulations that occur during the sermon event are stomping, jumping, wiping one’s face with a towel or handkerchief, pacing, pounding on the podium, the use of props such as a chair, podium, or other people, high stepping (running in place momentarily) etc. Perhaps one the most widely used and communicative of the aforementioned gesticulative elements is the wiping of one’s face. While there is an apparent and practical reason for this, which is that typically a pulpit is lit from above and preachers usually wear a suit while delivering a sermon. Therefore, the pulpit area gets warm and it becomes necessary to wipe the sweat from ones brow. However, I would argue that preachers often use the gesture of wiping the sweat from his/her face as a communicative

component. That is, preachers often amplify this gesture, especially at the rhetorical climax of the sermon, in order to demonstrate that he/she is “exerting” him/herself in the interest of making a meaningful point. That is, preachers vigorously wipe his/her face to show that he/she is toiling in the name of preaching or driving home a point for the sake of uplifting his/her congregation. Wiping of the face is often coupled with a strategic pause in order to further add emphasis to what is being said. While it may seem inapt to demonstrate gesticulation through a printed medium, I hold that the emphasis created by this gesture is communicable even through transcription.

Similarly, many Black preachers often accompany heightened pitch or gravelly voice with placing their hand on their lower back and often bending slightly backward. This movement also communicates that the preacher is laboring and exerting him/herself for the sake of conveying the message to the audience.

5.1.5 Sing-Song Style

There are many monikers that describe the varied ways in which many Black preachers employ a musical tone during the climax of the preaching event. Henry L Mitchell mentions that the most widely used terms used to describe this musical tone are “moaning”, “mourning” “tuning” “whooping”, and “zooning”. Practitioners of this type of musicality are often referred to as whoopers. It is worth noting that one will

seldom, if ever observe a Black Preacher approach the pulpit and immediately begin to deliver his/her message in sing-song style. This stylistic feature is usually reserved for the climax or end of the sermon. Martha Simmons argues in *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, that the best whoopers use their voices like instruments. These Black preachers follow unstated rules of rhythm, tone and melody from within the African American homiletic tradition. Simmons contends that “all good whoopers have some ‘music’ in their throat” (865). Whooping should not be conceptualized as an act of mere entertainment, but more accurately as an authentic expression of the preacher’s fervor for preaching. Throughout the sermon event, the preacher’s voice may oscillate between a musical quality and the normal speaking voice. However, when the preacher actually begins to whoop, the musicality takes over and the interplay back and forth normally ceases. Dyson contends that “as a species of Black sacred rhetoric, whooping is characterized by the repetition of rhythmic patterns of speech whose effect is achieved by variation of pitch, speed, and rhythm. The “whooped” sermon climaxes in an artful abbreviation or artificial stretching of syllables, a dramatic shift in meter, and often a coarsening of timbre, producing tuneful speech. In Black worship, whooping is central to the performance of Black sacred rhetoric”. (117). There is a widely perceived connection between sing-song style, or whooping, and Divine involvement in the sermon. That is, this heightened style often emerges after the point of ‘elevation’ when preachers are said to start receiving ideas and words from on high. The voice eases from a conversational to a

poetic style. In sing-song style, the words pattern themselves into short, cadenced, phrases, and these phrases assume a distinctly melodic lilt, taking on tonal contours that lend the entire oration a chant-like character. Most scholars trace sing-song style back to West Africa griots, the dramatic storytellers who preserved a people's oral tradition. Some trace it to the "tonal" nature of African languages, the drums of Africa; and the later need for the slave preacher to rouse the battered spirits of enslaved Africans.

As stated, when a preacher goes into the whoop that preacher is believed to be giving her/himself over to the Spirit. As certain preacher/pastors are delivering their weekly homily, when they arrive at the part of the service in which it is believed that their "help" has come, the "anointing" that is believed to fall on them manifests in many observable ways. The preacher may begin to take very deep, loud breaths between his phrases, repeat certain phrases, and start singing more than speaking. Often, the minister of music will attempt to match the key of the organ or piano to the one in which the pastor is preaching.

I find it important to note that whooping is a recognized terminology within the black church, but it even when it is not called by this moniker; it is a readily recognizable aspect of Black preaching. Linda Jones draws a distinction between the sing-song style employed in the traditional Black Church with that of the more contemporary Black Church in "Whoop it Up: Young Pastors Revive a Fading

Tradition Among Black Preachers". Jones asserts that "Old-style" whoopers usually begin slowly and methodically, then follow a single, dramatic crescendo."New-style" whoopers often have a faster tempo and have multiple crescendos before ending their sermons.

Sing-song style is an integral part of the African American sermonic tradition and facilitates the move of the sermon event to its rhetorical climax. Whooping serves to signal a move of the Divine within the sermon moment, and thus often garners a favorable response from the audience.

5.1.6 Repetition and Refrain

The use of parallel sentence structure and repetition add a colorful element to the Black Church sermon and is typically seen as a display of rhetorical design. Such rhetorical maneuvers garner respect from the congregation and fortify the credibility and rhetorical reputation of the speaker. Henry Louis Gates Jr. contends in *The Signifying Monkey* that "black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use. And the repository that contains the language that is the source-and the reflection-of black difference is the [B]lack English vernacular tradition" (xxiii). The rhetoric of the African American sermonic tradition seems to operate under the assumption that vital material requires time to sink in. The emphasis is more on the intensity of response more than the extensity of material covered. Within the African American Christian tradition,

specifically poignant words or phrases are repeated for emphasis. Repetition is a major rhetorical strategy for producing emphasis, clarity, amplification, or emotional effect. Scriptures, aphorisms, and other significant statements are repeated even to the point where such words or phrases assume a chant-like lilt.

Bishop Noel Jones effectively utilizes repetition as a rhetorical device in the following sermon excerpt. He exclaims:

He gave me a mind and ya' can't let other folk talk you out of your mind, your mind is God-given. Your mind is intellectual. Your mind can think things through. You are articulate. You got personality. You got character. God said I wanna' use ya' to break down the stronghold of poverty. I wanna' use you to manifest that weeping may endure for a night, but joy is coming in the morning. [unintelligible guttural groan]. Want you to know. No weap...[pauses to wipe face with a towel] I feel like runnin'. Somebody holla' Shine. Tell your neighbor Shine. Shine to a new house. Shine on your new job. Shine in this house. Shine wit' ya' family. Shine, Shine, Shine, Shine. God is in ya'. Shine. Power. Shine. Spirit of God , Shine. Holiness, Shine. Victory is mine, I'm Gonna' shine. Hit somebody. Say Shine. It's in ya'. It's in ya'. It's in ya' It's in ya'. It's in ya'. Shine. [Long Pause] Shine preacher. Shine choir. Shine fathers, Shine mothers. It's our time to shine. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Shine!

Bishop Jones uses repetition in several different capacities in this passage. The first of which is through parallel sentence structure. He exclaims “He gave me a mind and ya’ can’t let other folk talk you out of your mind, your mind is God-given. Your mind is intellectual. Your mind can think things through.” By beginning each of his phrases with *your mind*, Bishop Jones places the focus squarely on the audience members in hopes of making the message resonate with them individually. Similarly, “You are articulate. You got personality. You got character” directly addresses the congregation and demonstrates that the message is meant specifically for them as individuals. By beginning each sentence in this phrase with *you*, Bishop Jones emphasizes the individual applicability of his sermon. Bishop Jones continues, “Somebody holla’ Shine. Tell your neighbor Shine. Shine to a new house. Shine on your new job. Shine in this house. Shine wit’ ya’ family”. Here, he underscores his point that Christians should not accept a defeatist attitude by instructing them first shout *shine* then to tell the person next to them to *shine*. By beginning each of the phrases by exclaiming *Shine!*, the effect is that the sermon builds in intensity and crescendos into a raucous chant of the word *shine*. He loudly intones the word four times in a row each time with more vehemence than the last.

By repeating the word *shine* over and over again, the rhetorical effect is that the word is given prominence within the sermon and will therefore be remembered. Also *Shine*, in this instance is delivered as a verbal imperative. Repeating *shine* as a command exemplifies the zeal with which he contends his hearers should be living

their lives. Similarly, Bishop Jones exclaims “it’s in ya” five times in a row. That is to convey that the capacity to shine and excel in every facet of ones life already exists in him/her ex-officio as a Christian. This rhetorical tactic is rousingly impactful as it takes on a chant-like quality and garners the congregation’s enthusiasm. In order to further tailor his message to his audience, Bishop Jones proceeds to directly address the different stations and demographics represented in his congregation. That is, he exclaims, “shine preacher. Shine choir. Shine fathers, Shine mothers. It’s our time to shine. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Shine!” In doing so, Bishop Jones indicates that his message is widely applicable yet should be absorbed by each person individually. At this point his audience erupts into varied, enthusiastic exclamations of concurrence.

The following sermon excerpt was delivered by Reverend Jeremiah Wright to his congregation at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois. on January 27, 2008. The scriptural foundation for his sermon comes from John chapter 7, and leading up to reading the passage from John, Reverend Wright repeats the same phrase in order to emphasize the importance of what he is about to read from that passage. He proceeds as follows:

Mathew tells the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil. But the story in John 7 is more powerful than that. Mark tells the story of Jesus being in the synagogue and a man coming to worship with a withered hand – but the story in John 7 is more powerful than that. Luke tells the story of

Jesus going to Jericho and as he passed a blind man who heard the crowd with Jesus passing and asked what was happening and they told him “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by” so he shouted “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. ... But the story in John 7 is even more powerful than that.

The refrain “But the story in John 7 is more powerful than that” builds the audience’s anticipation for what will be encountered in John 7. Each time that he repeats this refrain, the volume and momentum of his words builds. This serves to emphasize the powerful nature of what happens in John 7 by generating a rhetorical power through repetition. Similarly, Wright, like many other Black preachers in adherence to the mores of the African American rhetorical tradition, uses poeticism to accentuate his orations. Later in the same sermon, Wright states:

You don’t let what other people *know* about you, you don’t let what other people *think* about you, you don’t let what other people *say* about you keep you from coming into the presence of the one who knows *all* about you and loves you just as you are. You don’t let people keep you from praise.

Again, Wright demonstrates the use of a refrain and repetition. In this passage, however, he varies his intonation of the italicized words in order to create emphasis and create a lyrical lilt to his words. This use of parallel sentence structure and repetition adds a colorful element to the sermon and is typically seen as a display of

rhetorical design. These rhetorical maneuvers garner hearty, uplifting exclamations from the congregation. Reverend Wright continues

People didn't *make* you, people didn't *die* for you, people didn't get up early on Sunday for you, people ain't got a heaven or hell to put you in, and *people did not wake you up this morning!* You don't let people keep you from praising Him who has the first word and the last word in your life.

Here Reverend Wright begins with *people* to build the momentum of the contrast he is drawing between people and God. His main contention here is that Christians should not allow the actions of others to dictate to their relationship with God. By repeating *people* the audience is given the opportunity to reflect on the dichotomy that he sets up between human beings and Christ.

In another example of repetition and refrain as they infor the Black Church sermon, Bishop Paul L. Morton delivered the following sermon at a revival event referred to as MegaFest in 2005. He exclaims

Sin. Can I preach in this place? Is never...In fact I feel like preaching in this place. Sin is never successful. Sin, is superficial. Sin is temporary because the devil, the devil is setting you up. But I come to speak into somebody's life. Why? Is the wicked prospering, Why? is the wicked

man gaining power. Why? can the man who's whippin' his wife, playin' on his wife make it and I'm tryna' do the best I can and still got hell in my house. I come to talk to you today to tell you one mo' time, don't you get weary in well doing.

While this excerpt contains several different rhetorical maneuvers, presently, I will focus on perhaps the most prevalent, repetition. The repetition of the word *sin* and the question *Why?* Bishop Morton begins this excerpt by informing his audience that he about to speak about sin. That is, he simply states the word *Sin* and then performs what I refer to as self-interruption, which shall be treated below, by asking for what I referred to previously in this exposition as 'permission to preach'. He then begins three consecutive sentences with the word *sin*. In stressing the word *sin* Bishop Morton builds a rhetorical momentum that will culminate later in the sermon. He employs parallel sentence structure with each reference to the word *sin* and proceeds to teach his congregation about the nature of sin in a very lyrical, thus easily memorable fashion.

5.1.7 Self Interruption

Often, Black preachers interrupt their own thought during their oration to make a statement. Bishop Morton, performs what I referred to earlier as "permission to preach", only in this instance he simultaneously performs a rhetorical maneuver I shall refer to as "self-interruption". Bishop Morton preaches "Sin. Can I preach in this place? Is never...In fact I feel like preaching in this place. Sin is never successful.

Sin, is superficial”. By interrupting his own thought, Bishop Morton adds emphasis to and builds anticipation for the interrupted phrase.

5.1.8 Intentional Stammer/Stutter

Many Black Church preachers employ a rhetorical/paralinguistic embellishment that I will refer to as the “intentional stammer” Mitchell contends that “In addition to building suspense and increasing interest in the ultimate expression to be delivered, this technique seems to portray that the preacher is groping for truth, or struggling to hear what is coming from above” (176). While establishing the appearance of the aforementioned “labor” seen as meritorious in preaching the Gospel in the African American religious rhetorical tradition, the inclusion of a stammer or stutter during the sermon also avoids the impression of a cerebral approach or overwhelming intellect on the part of the speaker and preempts the accusation of a flashy or superficial presentation. Mitchell continues “as the preacher searches and gropes, the members of the congregation cry, ‘Help him. Lord!’ as evidence of their warm identification with the speaker” (176). Bishop Jakes aptly demonstrates the intentional stammer in an excerpt included above that bears revisiting. He preaches:

The problem with most people is that everybody they run around with is under them. And so you are forever feeding people who can't feed you. And after years of feeding them they begin to drain you, huh. You got to have somebody who can feed you, so you can feed somebody else, oh

ya'll don't hear what I'm sayin. Am...am...am I talkin' to anybody in here?

Here, Bishop Jakes seemingly intentionally stammers over the word *am*. In doing so he implicitly gives the impression to his audience that he is struggling and straining on their behalf to deliver a message from God that is relevant to their lives. The intentional stammer also draws attention to the word or phrase that is stuttered. That is, as the preacher stumbles he in turn repeats the word and thereby creates emphasis on the rest of the phrase that is then delivered without impediment.

5.1.9 Non-Verbal punctuation

Contributing to the musicality of the Black Church sermon is the “hunh” that many Black Preachers use at the end of chanted breath groups as an energizing punctuation catalyzing them toward the next phrase. Rickford refers to this non-verbal punctuation in *Spoken Soul* he states that “with its quavering falsettos and sonorous baritones, purposeful stuttering, fetching snarls and whispers, singsong melody, rhymes, and half rhymes, interjected exclamations of ‘hunh’ and other trademarks, black preaching is hard to miss and impossible to dismiss” (41). Once again, it is very challenging to fully demonstrate the musicality created by this type of nonverbal communication through a written medium, but it certainly bears at least a fragmentary treatment, here. In order to demonstrate the use of the audible gasp or non-verbal punctuation I will revisit an earlier excerpt from a sermon delivered by Bishop Noel Jones.

I feel like preaching in here, I feel like lifting him up, hunh [audible exhale]. Can I preach like I feel it? If you participate wit' God it'll last longer. The first commandments, hunh, were broken instantly. The second commandments, hunh, are still around. Because when Moses got involved he put the human factor, hunh, with the heavenly factor, hunh. Some of us want the church to be built on prayer, but you got to reach in yo' pocket, huh, and put yo' money on the table, huh.

Bishop Jones artfully demonstrates this lyrical skill by ending each phrasal unit with an audible “hunh”. This sound is not entirely accurately described as a gasp or breath but also cannot be classified as a textual marker, as defined by Wharry, as it does not constitute an intelligible word. This utterance serves to punctuate his phrases as well as establish momentum with which to begin the next phrase. Heard audibly, the non-verbal punctuation lends the sermon a melodic lilt that is typically received with pleasure and acclamation from the congregation.

5.1.10 Circumlocution

Circumlocution refers to the pattern of communication that links seemingly unrelated topics simply by the use of *and*. Many Black Church preachers employ a somewhat disjointed and discontinuous rhetorical pattern.

Smitherman states that “the rendering of sermon in the traditional Black Church nearly always involves extended narration as a device to convey the theme. Rarely will black preachers expound on their message in the linear fashion of a

lecture. Rather, the thematic motif is dramatized with gestures, movement, plot, real-life characterization, and circumlocutory rhetorical flourishes. The preacher thus becomes an actor and storyteller in the best sense of the word” (150).

5.1 11 Humor within the Sermon

An often overlooked aspect of the African American Christian tradition concerns the inclusion of humor during the sermon event. While preachers rarely tell jokes, in the traditional sense of a setup followed by a punch line, they often employ jest in the sense of exaggeration, impersonation or mimicry, subtle irony, or lighthearted quips. Often, the use of humor during the Black Church sermons entails some lightly secular elements. In order to illustrate the types of humor intrinsic to the African American sermonic tradition I will reexamine a portion of one TD Jakes’ abovementioned sermon excerpts. Bishop Jakes instructs his congregation to “look at your neighbor and ask them, do you have a mind to change? [audience: Do you have a mind to change?] Wait for an answer. If they say no, drag em’ to the altar. Tell ‘em they got ‘til midnight to get that fixed”. Humor, at this point in the sermon, serves to bolster Bishop Jakes’ message on several levels. Foremost, humor moderates the audience interaction that Jakes prescribes. Instructing the members of the congregation to turn to one another and deliver humorous content, it makes their interaction more comfortable. Secondly, humor provides a blithe segue into the more weighty topics that follow. The use of humor allows him the space and opportunity to broach more serious topics. Finally, the type of humor employed here does not allow

for the material to be easily dismissed. That is, it is evident that there is some truth in the jest. Bishop Jakes obviously does not account for or expect his congregation to literally grab their neighbor and drag him/her to the altar, but he likely does expect it to be understood that this is a serious matter and the message that follows warrants action.

The preceding chapter is not meant to serve as an exhaustive treatment of the rhetorical embellishments, paralinguistic accompaniments, and performative elements that emerge within Black Church sermons. Rather, I wish to underscore the rhetorical and communicative significance of these elements and highlight the vast gap in research within the field of rhetoric concerning the varied modes of expression and communication that comprise the African American sermonic tradition

CHAPTER 6

AAVE AS IT INFORMS BLACK CHURCH SERMONS

6.1 What Constitutes African American Vernacular English?

The aim of the present chapter is to delineate the ways in which African American Vernacular English permeates, saturates, and colors Black Church sermons. AAVE is a rich, deeply engrained mode of communication within African American culture. Aside from the grammatical and phonological rules of AAVE, aforementioned stylistic traditions such as verbal repartee, repetition, and call-response are also recognized as features of AAVE and traced back to oral traditions of Africa.

In order to discuss the pervasiveness of AAVE within the African American religious rhetorical tradition, it is first necessary to define and provide some background for the term and establish parameters for the manner in which it will be applied in the remainder of this exposition.

While AAVE is the most widely endorsed dialect within the Black community, it is important to note that not all African Americans readily make use of AAVE, and not all speakers who regularly employ AAVE are African American. Nonetheless, the vernacular is an indelible part of Black culture. There are numerous terms used to

describe the oral communicative practices employed by many African Americans, such as Black Vernacular English, Black Language, African American Language, Ebonics, and Black English among others. There remains widespread controversy among linguists as to whether the discrepancy between the language patterns characteristic of many African Americans constitutes a separate language from English, a dialect of English, or a pidgin. However, the debate over this designation is a matter for a separate discussion, and for the purposes of this exposition I shall continue to solely employ the term African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as it constitutes a dialect of English.

Henry H. Mitchell, contributor to *Language Communication and Rhetoric in Black America*, states that AAVE “is the lingua franca of the black [community] full of subtle shadings of sound and significance, cadence and color; it beguiles the hearer because it is familiar. It establishes rapport with him and influences him” (91). For Mitchell, the use of AAVE as a communicative mode establishes a tacit solidarity between Black speaker and listener. Mitchell argues that AAVE differs from Standard English in that its speakers typically employ a simpler sentence structure and slower rate of delivery. He posits that other differences range from the grammatical and technical to distinctive tonal variations and inflections. “Other differences range from highly technical and subtle uses down to the peculiar tonal inflections” (93). AAVE does not entail an entirely separate vocabulary from Standard English. However, AAVE speakers often draw on words and phrases which are not found in other

varieties of English and often appropriate Standard English words in ways that alter their meanings from Standard English definitions.

In summation, AAVE constitutes an ethnically specific dialect reflective of the linguistic double-consciousness of Black American life. That is, African Americans are typically aware of the marginalized status of AAVE, but also recognize its centrality in the African American experience. AAVE, as a discursive mode, has separate grammatical conventions and linguistic patterns from Standard English, and these distinctions present a boundless field of inquiry in descriptive linguistics and culturally and ethnically specific rhetorics.

6.2 Possible Origin/History of AAVE

The distinctive circumstances by which Blacks arrived in America and their abrupt departure from their original tongue has resulted in several theories regarding the origins of AAVE, however, none prove wholly conclusive. Several Creolists, including William Stewart, J.L Dillard, and John Rickford among others argue that AAVE shares so many characteristics with Creole dialects spoken by Black people in much of the world that AAVE is itself a Creole. It has been suggested that AAVE has grammatical structures in common with West African languages, and AAVE is best described as an African based language with English words. Linguist Geneva Smitherman contends that:

U. S. Ebonics refers to those language patterns and communication styles that

1. are derived from Niger-Congo African languages: and/or
2. are derived from Creole languages of the Caribbean: and/or
3. are derived from the linguistic interaction of English and African Languages, creating a language related to but not directly the same as either English or West African languages.(qtd. in Alim 36)

That is, Creolist theorists maintain that AAVE is a Creole of African languages and English with its own separate linguistic and semantic conventions. In *Talkin' Black Talk*, Black scholars and editors H. Samy Alim and John Baugh posit that “While the black population in the United States is far more diverse than is often noted, the languages of most Black slave descendants in the Americas do share two very important points. First, all the “New World” hybrid languages are the result of contact between African and European languages (Ibo and English for example.)” (Alim 3)

While the Creolist theory regarding the origins of AAVE is widely accepted, there are other less established theories that have been considered. Dillard contends in *Lexicon of Black English* that linguists who subscribe to the *Establishment* tradition have attempted to prove that AAVE resulted from the slaves acquiring the language patterns of their slave owners. However, he maintains that even the earliest slave narratives exhibit marked differences from White southerners’ writing during the time period. While it is clear that there is a strong relationship between AAVE and

Southern American English, the unique characteristics of AAVE cannot be fully explained as simply a derivative of Southern English.

Dillard has also attempted to disprove what is known as the Anglicist theory. Dillard writes in *Black English* that the theory that AAVE derived from English and Scottish language patterns proves defective due to the fact that slaves would have never been exposed to English or Scottish dialects except through the slave traders and later slave owners who did not transmit the dialect to America because of a phenomenon known as dialect leveling.

Another theory regarding origin of AAVE, which only claims nuanced differences from other widely-held Creolist theories, is that AAVE arose from one or more slave creoles that were derived from the trans-Atlantic slave trade due to the need for African captives to communicate among themselves for the purposes of survival. Recent exploration and theories regarding the origins of AAVE attest to the increasing mainstream acceptance of the dialect a legitimate language form.

6.3 Stigmas Associated with AAVE

While modernity has brought about attention to Black language use in the past decade and academia and society at large are beginning to acknowledge AAVE as a viable, valid form of communication, many negative notions regarding AAVE linger. Black scholar, linguist, and social critic Geneva Smitherman states that “an honest summary of our language history over the past 3 decades warrants the conclusion

that progress has been made... We no longer have to fight for the legitimacy of African American speech” (154). While Black English is beginning to be considered permissible English, it is often regarded as substandard and often associated with African Americans of low socio-economic status. AAVE is often marginalized to encompass only the way in which African Americans speak colloquially and regarded as only having its place in very informal settings. Dillard argues that AAVE is often erroneously viewed as a purely colloquial language form, or that its use is limited to younger, poorer African Americans. However, he asserts that AAVE is pervasive within Black culture and is often spoken by African Americans well into middle age and middle class (ix). AAVE is not limited to informal, colloquial settings, albeit less frequently, many Black speakers employ AAVE in more formal venues and settings.

Typically, AAVE and Standard English are mutually intelligible, which may account for some of the mainstream confusion and resulting societal stigmas which often cause AAVE to be viewed as merely incorrect or broken English. Alim speaks to these negative assumptions as he argues “all these languages, without exception have been viewed as lesser versions of their European counterparts, to put it mildly, or have suffered under the laws, practices, and ideologies of linguistic supremacy and White racism. It is the ideology and practice of linguistic supremacy – that is the false unsubstantiated notion that certain linguistic norms are inherently superior to the linguistic norms of other communities” (3). For Alim, due to the reverberations of racism, AAVE has widely been characterized as substandard, incorrect, and

ungrammatical English. The use of AAVE is often deemed indicative of a lack of education. In schools and academia at large, African American vernacular is often regarded as an impediment to be remediated. Scholar Charles E. Debose asserts in ‘The Ebonics Phenomenon, Language Planning, and the Hegemony of Standard English’

Hegemonic ideas and values ... function to give legitimacy to the existing social order by providing justifications for inequalities in the distribution of social goods. In the realm of lifestyle and culture, the customs and practices of elite groups come to symbolize the benefits of membership in the elite and to serve as desirable attainments for persons striving toward elite status. When a particular language or way of speaking is associated with the elite, the ability to speak the language and speak it “correctly” may serve as a legitimating function. That is, the superior position of the dominant group is justified by its “proper” speech. Similarly, the subordinate position of marginalized groups is legitimated by the characterization of their language in such pejorative terms as *poor, slovenly, broken, bastardized, or corrupt.*

(Debose 31)

Further exposure to the grammatical and linguistic features specific to AAVE is necessary in order to divest mainstream society of stigmatized notions regarding AAVE language use.

6.4 Code-switching

It is extremely difficult to estimate how many people fluently employ AAVE, as some speakers may use some distinctive aspects of phonology (pronunciation) and lexis (vocabulary), but none of the grammatical features associated with the variety. Many sociolinguists reserve the term AAVE for varieties which are marked by the occurrence of certain distinctive grammatical features. Even so, it remains difficult to say with any precision how many AAVE speakers there are since such grammatical features occur variably, that is, in alternation with standard features. Such variability in the speech both of groups and individuals reflects the complex social attitudes surrounding AAVE and other nonstandard varieties of English.

Quite often African Americans are fully versed in the conventions of Standard English, yet choose to speak to other African Americans by means of AAVE because of the natural rapport the language choice fosters. Jacquelyn Rahman writes in “Middle Class African American Reactions toward AAVE” that middle class African Americans must exhibit a fair amount of “linguistic diplomacy and intra-speaker variation” in order to navigate the varied social situations with which they are faced on a daily basis (141). That is, middle-class African Americans feel pressure to be fluent in Standard English but often revert to AAVE in social situations in which they deem it appropriate.

While AAVE is inherently linguistically heterogeneous, even with its regional variations, it is markedly and unmistakably *Black*, meaning that when a speaker of AAVE hears another speaker employ the vernacular, there is an instant recognition of that person's ethnicity and/or culture and thus the vernacular forges an instant connection and an unspoken solidarity between speakers. The use of AAVE is an indelible aspect of the cultural identity of many African Americans. According to Donald Davidson a cultural community is roughly equivalent to a "conceptual scheme" "Davidson explains that conceptual schemes are 'ways of organizing experience; they are points of view from which individuals cultures survey the passing scene'" (Kent, 246). That is, AAVE reflects cultural mores, ethnically specific ideologies, and ethnic and national identities of the African Americans who speak it.

Renowned Black scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. poses a theory regarding the communicative patterns of human beings, namely African Americans, which he calls the notion of privacy in language. In this theory, Gates discusses the notion of language as "reality as encoded in a distinctive idiom" (92). Furthermore, he states that:

Each person draws on two sources of linguistic supply: the current usage that corresponds to his particular level of literacy as well as private thesaurus. The latter is inextricably part of his subconscious, of his memories so far as they can be verbalized, and of his regular identity. Each communication act has a private residue the 'personal

lexicon' in all of us inevitably qualifies the definitions, connotations, and denotations in public discourse. Even the concept of standard usage is a fiction, as statistical average. The language of a community, however uniform its social contour is an inexhaustibly multiple aggregate of finally irreducible meanings. This is what I call the notion of privacy in language. (93)

That is, for Gates, language can be culturally imprinted and hails from the collective consciousness of a community of people. This is a brilliant insight into the origins and implications of ethnically specific dialects such as African American Vernacular English. While Gates' discussion of "private meaning" is relevant to an examination of the reaches of AAVE, it is part of a separate discussion and does not fall within the confines of purpose of this exposition. However, Gates' insights attest to the fact that there is still much research and attention that needs to be devoted to the study of AAVE and the rhetorical patterns and tactics peculiar to the African American religious rhetorical tradition. AAVE is ubiquitous within Black culture and perhaps the area in which its pervasiveness has been the most underplayed is in the religious rhetorical tradition.

6.5 AAVE in the Black Church Sermon

In religious circles throughout history, Standard English (or Latin in Catholicism) has been deemed the only acceptable means by which to preach the gospel in public. With the rise of the Black Church, however, this standard has been

challenged. The vast majority of Black churches have found it difficult to relate to Black clergymen who solely speak Standard English. When a substantial number of Black culture churches have been faced with the choice between a pastor who could effectively communicate with them or one who was well-educated, but not Black-culture proficient, they have chosen communicative proficiency over education.

While as stated, AAVE has been rejected by mainstream White culture and largely by academia, it is fully embraced within the Black Church. Given the above stricture for the ways in which the term AAVE applies, I shall discuss the ways in which AAVE permeates and shapes the rhetoric of the Black Church.

Coupled with the emphasis on adept verbal communication skills within the Black community, the use of Black vernacular in public forums such as religious sermons is a way for Black speakers and preachers to communicate in a familiar, comfortable, and often automatic vernacular with his/her congregation which is a part of his/her discursive community. Mitchell asserts that within a speech community it is easiest to communicate by using the language of that group. The subtle meanings and shades of meaning, the particular pronunciation and accent, the intonation and total signal of any given group are altogether “proper” to that group. In fact, no language is improper among its own users, since it is most capable of the task for which all language exists: communication” (88). Black preacher’s use of AAVE within a sermon is viewed as entirely normative, and indeed the absence of AAVE would be conspicuous. Black preachers apply AAVE in order to make the sermon more

relatable for a predominantly Black congregation. Mitchell contends that “the lesson of the message is better learned because the scene is experienced in the worship rather than simply heard in theory. The experience factor is greatly reduced when the message is offered in a foreign tongue”. That is, AAVE is not simply a language choice that fosters solidarity between preacher and congregation, but is so culturally ingrained that it aids in meaning-making on the part of the audience.

Black preachers often employ varying degrees of AAVE in a sermon. It is not uncommon for a Black preacher to paraphrase a scripture using AAVE. Mitchell states “for instance a Black preacher might render God’s speech to Peter in the text against racism (Acts 10 14-15): Looka here, Peter, Don’t you be callin’ *nothin’* I made common or dirty!” (92). This presents the message in a familiar and relatable manner and validates Black identity by putting the vernacular of the people into the mouth of God. Mitchell continues: “No man can truly identify with a god who only speaks the language of his oppressor” (92). Most speakers of AAVE recognize that the vernacular is considered incorrect by prescriptive English standards, and recognize the preacher’s motives of “relatability” in incorporating AAVE into his sermon. Typically, the limited use of AAVE is viewed favorably by a Black congregation as an attempt to assert and preserve his ethnic identity while employing flawless Standard English grammar and usage elsewhere in the sermon. Mitchell asserts the importance for a Black preacher to exhibit a sort of bilingual competency. He states that the Black preacher “must assure his congregation that he doesn’t talk flat all the

time, so that they will have confidence that he can adequately represent their interests outside of the [Black community]" (91). That is to say, it is important for Black preachers to be proficient in Standard English as well as be able to code-switch seamlessly between it and AAVE in order to best serve the dual needs of his congregation. Freedman argues that "great sermons often follow a trajectory between [two] poles, beginning with the precise elocution, refined vocabulary, and elaborate metaphor of the academy and working their way to the vernacular language and almost physical catharsis of the black tradition " (183).

In *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation* Teresa

L. Fry Brown asserts that

An essential element of sermon transportability in a variety of cultural contexts is a form of "code-switching" or bilingualism. That is, the speaker is able to use two or more linguistic varieties, tonal registers, dialects, or levels of language in the same conversation. The preacher is aware of the communication conventions, the role and function of acceptable language with the listeners. Code-switching is a learned behavior that allows members of certain cultural groups for instance African Americans, to move in and out of Standard English in order to represent their own cultural emotional codes. Code-switching promotes the culture and identity of the preacher promoting solidarity with one segment of the congregation and opening up the sermon reception with

others. This is important to the emotive content of preaching. Code-switching allows the preacher to manipulate, influence, or define the information as they wish, and to convey nuances of meaning and personal intention. Repetition of a phrase, word, or idea in the language of the majority of the listeners allows the preacher to reinforce, emphasize, or clarify a point delivered in one code but will likely be misunderstood in another. (21)

Rickford states “in many black churches, as the emotions of the congregants are stirred and the accoutrements of the starched work week are shed, use of black vernacular peaks.(53)

Reverend Wright’s sermon provides an exemplary model for the ways in which AAVE enlivens the African American religious sermon. He seamlessly intersperses AAVE into his sermon in an effort to connect with his audience. In this transcribed sermon Wright paraphrases the Bible in order to make the message more palatable to his congregation. He preaches:

Verse 14 says that right around the middle of the festival, Jesus went into the temple and began to teach. Here’s the picture I want you to get in your mind; Jesus talking, Jesus teaching in the temple. Verse 25. Some of the people said: “isn’t this the man that some of the authorities are trying to kill? And here he is in the temple speaking openly? Ain’t

nobody saying nothing to nobody/ you think the authorities know that he is really the messiah?"

Here Reverend Wright translates the language of the speakers in the Bible into AAVE. In doing so he loses no credibility with his congregation because he informs them of which verse he is paraphrasing before he does so. This allows the audience to follow along while simultaneously hearing him translate the words of the Bible into a more germane and familiar vernacular. The portion of the scripture that is the most obvious AAVE paraphrase is the line "Ain't nobody saying nothing to nobody." The use of a double negative is commonplace within AAVE and does not warrant remediation as it does in Standard English. Walter Pitts, in his 1993 analysis, found that preachers' use of black vernacular features during the sermonic climax was twice as high as their conversational speech earlier in the service. (qtd. in Rickford 54)

Rickford asserts that because Black preachers tend to seek as broad a verbal and stylistic range as possible, the vernacular is an empowering element of their craft....The [black] preacher who uses [S]tandard English exclusively without any of the motifs, rhythms, and gestures of the soulful preaching style is in serious risk of losing the interest of a good portion of the congregation. (56). Mitchell asserts that many Black clergymen have had to be "White culture proficient" in order to satisfy college and seminary requirements, but when this education causes these clergymen to lose touch with their Black congregation the congregation will likely begin to drift.

The Black preacher “must be able to reach the souls of Black folk with soul language, putting them at ease and gaining maximum access by avoiding all the linguistic signals of social distance from his congregation” (Mitchell 90). One of the chief skills demanded of Black preacher is to connect with and influence his congregation without overtly stating that he has deliberately chosen the language most appropriate for the task. The preacher’s use of AAVE establishes his connection with Black culture and an explicit acknowledgment of this association would call his authenticity into question. This mix of charisma and eloquence that is the Black preacher is embodied in the cadence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Mitchell contends that “Dr. King was a brilliant fusion of markedly Black speech patterns and modes of delivery and prescriptive English” (88).

6.6 Slang and Secular references within the Sermon

Some of the most interesting and distinctive features of AAVE are to be uncovered in the kinds of expressions exclusive to African American discourses “considered unsuitable for drawing rooms where hegemonic, Eurocentric norms prevail, but accepted without comment even with satisfaction by those who have been entertained and enlivened by black talk” (Spears 101). Often Black preachers will use slang and even some mildly provocative language to emphasize a point. While the looser standards on what is permissible in Church sermons might seem inappropriate to those unfamiliar with the mores of the Black Church, within the African American sermonic tradition such comments are simply regarded as

expressive. While slang is used sparingly within Black Church sermons, it serves an inextricable function within the African American religious rhetorical tradition. Wright peppers these colloquialisms into his sermon as he continues:

Jesus talking kept his haters upset, But Jesus' talking also kept his haters at bay. Later it says; no one laid a hand on him. Now do you have picture of Jesus standing there talking? Verse 31 says that many in the crowd believed in him. The critics were *complaining* but the crowd was *believing* [emphasis in original] The folk finding fault were berating but the folk full of faith were believing. Haters were hating, and hoppers were hoping. That's what haters do and that's what hoppers do. (Wright)

Not only does the use of slang add an element of humor, it makes the sermon more palpable for younger members of the congregation. Mitchell describes the necessity for the Black pastor to be able to employ multifarious speech patterns by stating that:

He must be able to reach the souls of Black folk with soul Language, putting them at ease and gaining maximum access by avoiding all the linguistic signals of social distance from his congregation. Yet he must also be able to reinforce and keep alive the language learnings of the young people in his congregation which link them to the larger community. (91)

Even to those members of the congregation who are unfamiliar with the meaning of the slang he employs, such words as *haters* are so pervasive within Black culture,

and are gradually seeping into popular culture, that nearly anyone could decipher its meaning if from nothing more than context clues. A hater, in this context, is a person who has a perpetually negative outlook on life and allows that negativity to make him or her chronically jealous and disheartened by anything positive that occurs in another's life. The use of such a word conveys to the younger members of the congregation that the preacher is in touch with their lifestyle and concerns, and thus this lends the preacher an instant credibility with the youth in his congregation. Wright continues:

saying maybe this is the one, maybe God is getting ready to bust a move, maybe some real change is about to happen and not just cosmetic changes, where the name changes and the game is still the same. Look at verse 32. Switch over to those who hatin' on Jesus, verse 32; The Pharisees heard the crowd hoping and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent the temple police to arrest him and Jesus kept on talking. Say, Po-po "Here come the po-po." (Wright)

Wright continues to assert his connection with the younger members of his congregation with terms like Po-po. Po-po is a slang term that refers to a police officer. Additionally, he states that God is about to "bust a move," which simply means make a move, and ascribes slang to the actions of God. The use of slang is yet another way that the pastor establishes ethos with his congregation. The use of inherently *Black* language and employing modes of rhetorical delivery peculiar to

African American culture allow the Black preacher to maximize his influence on and credibility with his congregation. Reverend Wright continues.

See, a lot of us can ease up in here week after week, day after day.
And we can keep our problems on the D.L. Make-up. Fancy weaves.
Holy hats. Expensive suits. St. John's and Armani hide a lot of our stuff,
and most people don't know what's going on with us.

The use of words such as “D.L.” or down low conveys to the younger members of the congregation that the preacher is in touch with their lifestyle and concerns, and thus this lends the preacher an instant ethos or credibility with the youth in his congregation. Rickford argues that the informal flavor has at least two benefits: it perked up the congregation and it prompted laughter ...Most accomplished Black preachers use levity to wade into sensitive discussions....Blurring the lines between the sacred and the secular is permissible, as long as the preacher stays within the guidelines of the Bible, as long as the goal is to increase participation in the service and understanding of the Scriptures (57). As a culmination of the goals of “relatability”, subsequent ethos moderately secular language serves the rhetorical aims of the Black Church sermon.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

From the inception of the Black Church as an entity, African Americans have regarded the institution as a safe haven in which to express their cultural, spiritual, and communicative customs. The Black Church sermon as a discursive structure serves to highlight the ways in which African Americans have used the power of the spoken and written word as a form of resistance and spiritual, and self-expression in the midst of an oppressive society. The rhetoric of the African American communicative tradition has largely been marginalized outside of the scholarship of a handful of linguists and intellectuals. However, there exists a large gap in research, as the sermonic tradition of Black Church sermons has not been extensively treated from a rhetorical standpoint. The communicative modes organic to the Black Church sermon have been misunderstood and misapprehended both because it is a aural art form that is not easily treated in a written medium and because the tradition has been diluted as showy and ostentatious delivery and over-emotionality. The rhetorical trappings associated with Black Church sermons stem from a long tradition of African and African American communicative modes and without this type of widespread scholarly and popular exposure and contextualization the rhetoric of the Black

Church will continue to be marked by the exoticism and essentialism that has caused mainstream misunderstanding of the genre.

The sermon event serves as the nucleus of the Black Church experience, it reveals much about the spiritual, communicative and expressive nature of African American culture through the content, affective style, and paralinguistic elements involved in the sermon delivery. African American public discursive practices include many rhetorical tactics that are rarely observable outside of the Black Christian Church. The aggregate of congregational involvement through the pervasive call response system in its various incarnations, the musicality involved in the delivery, and other provocative and emotive rhetorical maneuvers come together to form a distinctive rhetorical system, the examination of which serves to open new doors in the field of rhetoric. One of the primary aims of the field of rhetoric is to examine the maneuverability of language as a means by which to influence and persuade audiences.

Many of the rhetorical principles that emerge within Black Church sermons can also be pedagogically situated as part of the classical rhetorical tradition. This fact is a testament to the ubiquity of Classical rhetorical concepts and speaks to the viability of Classical rhetoric in modernity. While Classical rhetoric cannot account for the full breadth of cultural nuances that emerge within African American sermonic rhetoric, the similarities between that two, such as concepts of ethos, kairos, and self-display are noteworthy and warrant further study. The field of rhetoric has been relegated to

simply include style and delivery. However, African American sermonic rhetoric represents the conciliatory opportunity to return to all five canons of rhetoric, as Black church sermons include inspired invention, creative arrangement, masterful memorization, electrifying style, and provocative delivery. The study of Black Church sermons constitutes a revival of the Classical conception of rhetoric and presents a plenary pedagogical opportunity to demonstrate these Classical rhetorical concepts. In addition to demonstrating the rhetorical canons in their entirety, African American sermonic rhetoric constitutes an incarnation of epideictic rhetoric. Epideictic rhetoric is concerned with extolling values and virtues, prompting action, and self-display within cultural contexts. Similarly, Black Church homiletics are concerned with disseminating the message of the Christian gospel to encourage congregational adherence to these Christian precepts, while delivering this message in an ethnically specific vernacular and communicative style. Black Church sermon performance represents a palpable pedagogical model of Epideictic rhetoric. That is, through web-based media outlets such as YouTube, students can witness Black Church sermons and apply the concepts of epideictic directly.

Part of the wide cultural appeal within the African American homiletic tradition can be attributed to the ethnically specific dialect used in imparting the gospel in the Black Church. AAVE as a linguistic system that informs Black Church rhetoric is far under researched in the field of rhetoric and African American Studies. AAVE serves more than to establish solidarity between audience and speaker through the use of

an ethnically specific vernacular, but also serves a hermeneutic function. That is, AAVE as applied to Biblical exegesis renders accessible and comprehensible the Gospel as it informs the plight and culture of African American diaspora. A wider academic discussion must ensue in order to continue the work of analyzing the ways in which the study of African American sermonic discourse enriches the field of rhetoric.

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