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Seminar Paper

The African American community is home to some of the most sacred, cherished, and unifying traditions and beliefs. Many of which play a significant role in members of the community's lives, but also the outside influence, and overall impact that these generational beliefs had on those around them. These fundamental traditions and 'ways of life' being transcended through literature speeches, song, vernacular language and dialogue, sermon, and so much more.

As vast and diverse of an area of study it is, African American rhetoric, there is one essential commonality seen throughout all its mediums: the tradition of call and response.

Playing a role in virtually all aspects of the African American experience, call/response has been thought of as the livelihood and or the spirit of the group.

One way to come to that conclusion is to be looking at it from a chronological point of view, going back all the way to the roots of this group, with the forced deportation and enslavement of Africans, to the work songs for those on plantations, to the chants used throughout the Civil Rights Movement.

Call/response has had a significant role in the entirety of the African American experience. It is the starting block for many communities within the group, especially, church congregation and the music industry. The presence of call/response in these spaces not only provides a sense of community and establishes a pattern of communication but creates a link between it [call/response in said spaces] and the African American experience as a whole.

Through analyzing the different spaces that call/response fills, it becomes clear of a pattern or more so, appropriate timing for it be used. Making this become an essential nature of

communication for this group, a communication that is primarily dependent on the socio-cultural context of daily life (street vs. church).

While I was researching, and really wanting to understand the role that call/response plays within the rhetoric and the internalized understanding of the rhetoric, I had to familiarize myself with the 'Traditional African World view' (Daniel and Smitherman 28). A term unfamiliar before now, is the idea of African Americans coming together to forge a cultural identity that encompasses both the individual identity and that of the larger group. This affirmation of self is done most through, call/response (Daniel and Smitherman 35).

This is essential when we examine what truly is call/response, the roles within, and the impact it has moving forward. But to do that, an understanding of what African American rhetoric truly is, is needed.

CALL/RESPONSE WITHIN AFRICAN AMERICAN RHETORIC

Through the usage of repetition, intense emotional appeal, unique patterns of grammar, and its lexicon, African American rhetoric is just one of the ways that this group is able to preserve its culture.

The communication between individuals of the African American community is a mutual exchange:

One must give if one is to receive and receiving is actively acknowledging another (Daniel and Smitherman).

This understanding alone can be the answer as to why repetition and intense emotional appeal are as significant as they are. The need to get one's message across and to be confirmed of that exchange, is primarily the basis of what call/response is.

An example of repetition and emotional appeal seen in African American rhetoric, is Martin Luther King Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream". With intentions to uplift and unify a congregation of well over 200,000, he incorporated a series of call/response cues to illustrate his 'dream' that can resonate with each individual present and all those to come (Branch 882).

"...I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream...", is one of the more famous parts of this speech, and supposedly was a direct response to an individual in the audience, who 'called' to Martin, "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" (Branch 882).

This exchange is just one of many that give call/response the power it possesses, the influence of improvisation and the ability to cultivate life and action from words!

He ends the speech with,

"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Serving as not only a unifying element of speech but more importantly acknowledges the transformation that these people endured; the generational oppression and racism that crippled and controlled the experiences of so many.

The characteristics and roles of unique grammar patterns and lexicons are so important when dissecting African American rhetoric because it is able to show us (visually and audibility) what distinguishes their rhetoric vernacularly.

An example of this can be seen when we consider slang today, with 'cool' and 'hot' meaning the opposite, allowing these smaller groups to have their informal language amongst the majority (Mufwene 206).

This is not just a modern concept for the African American community but can be tied back to the stories of enslavement, with slaves having to come up with their own form of

communication amongst their owners. This fight for a communal experience, the exchange of words and feelings, is synonymous to the societal fight this group continues to endure.

The ability to cultivate life from words, to truly embody the words we speak, is something that can be seen throughout the entirety of the African American experience.

CALL/RESPONSE WITHIN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

In acknowledging the African American Experience, one must familiarize themselves with the origin of it, beginning with the traditions and ideologies brought over and created by their African ancestors. And even though the horrors of enslavement suppressed many of the customs and hopes of these people, those that characterized these experiences, some elements were able to persist (Daniel and Smitherman).

One key component of communication within the traditional African community, is that it is an all-encompassing experience. In need of participation from everyone, all would participate in the congregation and act as contributors and witnesses to the communal cohesion of celebrating their culture through music or sermons.

This division and equal balance of power throughout the group makes for call/response to take the form of anything, and anywhere.

One environment that call/response truly takes its strongest form, the Black Church, is also where the 'rules' of call/response start to wave. The usage of call/response within the church allows for an experience that goes beyond the roles of preacher and audience, but the role that each individual has within the group. Not having to stick to the limits of members of audience, individuals are able to participate in,

“...an interactive, interdependent, spontaneous process for achieving a sense of unity in which members of the congregation obtain a feeling of satisfaction within themselves, between

themselves and others, and between themselves and the spiritual forces” (Daniel and Smitherman 27).

To obtain that feeling of satisfaction, one must partake in call/response, taking advantage of the creativity of the moment and allow themselves to respond in the moment, however they please.

And to remember that this is all a unified movement, everyone’s contributions playing part in maintaining harmony among the community, an essential aspect of the African continuum. The African continuum is important to be aware of when trying to understand why this group strives for such strong, healthy communal relations. It is based off the idea that all human/moral behavior is to reproduce this ‘cosmic harmony’ that aligns with the ‘cosmic macrocosm’, which simply is the belief that all is spiritual and part of the Supreme Power, which is essentially the African continuum.

How does this play out in today?

We see the general idea of the African continuum, this striving for harmony throughout can be seen in the strides of activism, the stance in politics, and in the lyrics of modern music.

Through their strides of activism, and engagement with politics, African Americans can use call/response to establish an objective correlative, a series of events or objects that are the formula for a particular emotion (Scott). Providing the seeds for this growth of emotional response and understanding towards political systems that allow injustices. In examples today it could simply be the response to a rally or movement speech such as,

“Teach brother!” Or “Do it, baby!” (Daniel and Smitherman 34).

These may be small replies to a much larger, abstract call, but nonetheless contribute to the idea of adding to the harmony, taking a role and responsibility within the congregation and overall experience.

And the role of call/response with music today, tying back to the idea of African Americans using it as a means of communicating, to challenge preexisting notions of the language or just generalized, Western conceptions. Being able to keep most of the initial message, emcees or rappers, are able to,

“...wreak havoc on the still unexamined assumptions of establishment conceptions of not just who but also what counts as articulate in a society of white racist domination that fetishes literacy to the exclusion of oral fluency...” (Robinson and Young 711).

Not only is the use of call/response in music in favor of maintaining the Black experience and keeping out white hegemonies but also in giving African Americans the space and encouragement to come into their own. One of the more famous examples of this idea is with James Brown, ‘Say it Loud, I’m Black and Proud’, he gave his POC listeners just the smallest of pushes to allow themselves to be comfortable in their own skin, and to vocalize that feeling (Robinson and Young 711).

Even though call/response has been historically influential and weaved throughout African American culture and rhetoric, it has been continuously misappropriated and simply just not being heard correctly by other racial groups.

In most Black/white situations, there is this universal cross-cultural communication interference, and this can be evident when looking specifically at cases with call/response. Not typically of the same traditions as that of someone from a non-African American background,

there responses are much more passive with little engagement. Seemingly, uninterested, which we know is not suitable within a call/response exchange.

Failure to partake in call/response is failure to acknowledge the true benefits and influential power that is possess, something that is larger than a communication divide but a cultural one.

The potential of call/response goes far beyond the rhetorical elements and means it possesses, but onto the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the power of the congregation. It is able to encompass the group as a whole, taking in the generational, historical effects and influence of this practice as well as the situational exchange it currently holds.

By acknowledging the role that call/response has and will continue to have in the African American community, allows for the preservation of its entirety. In order to maintain the tradition of call/response, we must be consciously aware of it and its influence, whether one is a member of the group or not.

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