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THE RHETORIC OF RACE

TOWARDS A REVOLUTIONARY CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK IDENTITY

MARIA DEL GUADALUPE DAVIDSON



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Universitat de València

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1ª edición de 2006

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ISBN: 978-84-8400-8

Imagen de la portada: Sophia de Vera Holtz

Diseño de la cubierta: Celso Hernández de la Figuera

Publicacions de la Universitat de València

<http://puv.uv.es>

publicacions@uv.es

*I would like to dedicate this work to my husband, Scott.
You are so precious to me*

*And to my three muses: Yannick, Kolya, and Yelena.
My prayer is that you will inherit a world at peace*

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my friends and former colleagues at the Community College of Allegheny County in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania especially Professor Lee Nott, Dr. Jean Aston, Professor Dan Lowe, Professor Pat Patterson, and Professor Wahi Abdulmalek. Thank you for your friendship and support of me and my family while we lived in Pittsburgh. I would also like to thank my current chair at the University of Oklahoma Dr. Jeanette Davidson. Jeanette, I will always be indebted to you for your kindness, guidance, and support. I would like to thank Dr. Janie Harden Fritz and Dr. Patricia Arneson for guiding me through the dissertation process out of which this current work is born. I would like to thank my friend Dr. George Yancy for his support and a lovely Mother's Day e-mail. George you are an inspiration and your work has had a significant impact on Africana Philosophy. I would like to thank my friends Dr. Jean-Jacques and Valerie Sene for being like family and giving the world two brilliant and beautiful children—Melissa and Danielle. I would like to thank Dr. Carme Manuel and Publicacions de la Universitat de València for the opportunity to publish my book. Finally I would like to acknowledge my husband, Scott, who never stopped encouraging and believing in me.

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Introduction

The Rhetoric of Race: Toward a Revolutionary Construction of Black Identity focuses on the period 1860-1970 and looks at three important moments in the history of African American critical life that have shaped black identity. I begin with a discussion of the Reconstruction, and in this period I examine the work of W. E. B. Du Bois¹ as the primary articulator of black identity. This section focuses specifically on his essay “The Talented Tenth.” The second period that I look at is the Harlem Renaissance. Here I focus on Alain Locke as the primary articulator of black identity. This section critiques Locke’s work *The New Negro*. Finally, I look at the Black Arts Movement and focus on Amiri Baraka as the primary articulator of black identity. Here I analyze Baraka and the politics of race as it appears in his essay “The Revolutionary Theater,” his play *Dutchman*, his poem “Black Art,” and his public life. I attempt to show that “authors” of black identity during these three important historical, political, and literally moments/movements in black America have not done what they stated as one of their goals, in particular, in James Baldwin’s words, to “spell your [its] own name.”² That is, black identity has never

¹ Since I do not want to be inauthentic in my approach to Du Bois and criticism of him, it is important to note that Joy James makes a point of showing how Du Bois does not hold to his idea of the Talented Tenth indefinitely. Several years into his intellectual career, he repudiates the concept. Yet, the idea and Du Bois’s early support of it continues to be critiqued because it is a powerful and entrenched idea in African American intellectual thought. Joy James lists the important scholars Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West as, “not necessarily rejecting the racial uplift ideology... Referring to themselves as ‘grandchildren’ of Du Bois’s intellectual elite...” (29). For a discussion of Du Bois’s repudiation of the Talented Tenth, see Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (15-34).

² This quote comes from James Baldwin’s book *The Fire Next Time*. The first part of the book is entitled “Letters to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation.” In this particular passage, Baldwin is writing to his nephew about the ideas of action and identity. He states

defined itself as an identity unto itself without reference to or being defined in contradiction to a dominant white identity. And although Baldwin does acknowledge that some blacks have overcome this, I would argue that on a mass scale, this is still unrealized. Therefore, I intend to examine the ramifications of a black identity that has always been created/discussed vis-à-vis white identity. My work then looks forward, as it calls for a revolutionary notion of black identity. For this I will do a Foucauldian analysis of identity augmented by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Jana Sawicki focusing on the ideas of resistance and “self-refusal.” I conclude by looking at some scholars on the “margins” as a source of revolutionary notions of black identity. Some of these scholars include bell hooks and Barbara Smith.

In her book *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Sonja K. Foss provides scholars with several rhetorical methods and applications. Chapters One and Two are grounded in Ideological Criticism. Foss discusses Ideological Criticism in the following way:

When rhetorical critics are interested in rhetoric primarily for what it suggests about beliefs and values, their focus is on the ideology manifest in an artifact. An *ideology* is a pattern or set of ideas, assumptions, beliefs, values, or interpretations of the world by which a culture or group operates. The ideology of a group typically includes “such things as the beliefs the members of the group hold, the concepts they use, the attitudes and psychological dispositions they exhibit, their motives, desires, values, predilections...” And ideology usually permeates everything produced in that culture or group, so its rhetorical artifacts—its works of art, religious practices, and institutions, for example—embody, enact, and express that ideology. (291)

This book analyzes both Du Bois and Locke from an ideological standpoint to determine whether the ideologies embodied in “The Talented Tenth” and *The New*

that “To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one’s sense of one’s own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations. You, don’t be afraid. I said that it was intended that you should perish in a ghetto, perish by never being allowed to go behind the white man’s definitions, by never being allowed to spell your proper name” (9).

Negro become “hegemonic” of black identity (295). Foss expresses my ultimate intention when she writes:

The primary goal of the ideological critic is to discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in an artifact and the ideologies that are being muted in it. The critic who discovers that the dominant ideology revealed in an artifact suppresses the voices of important interests or groups seeks to explicate the role of communication in creating and sustaining the suppression and to give voice to those interests. The ultimate aim of the ideological critic, as a result, is the emancipation of human potential that is being thwarted by an existing ideology or ideologies. (295-96)

In Chapter Three, I look at several “artifacts”³ left by Baraka and apply Foss’s Cluster Criticism.⁴ Foss defines Cluster Criticism as

A method developed by Burke to help the critic discover a rhetor’s worldview. In this method, the meanings that key symbols have for the rhetor are discovered by charting the symbols that cluster around those key symbols in the rhetorical artifacts. Burke explained the central idea of cluster analysis: “Now, the work of every writer [rhetor] contains a set of implicit equations...” The equations or clusters that the critic discovers in a rhetor’s artifacts generally will not be conscious to the rhetor: “And though he be perfectly conscious of the act of writing, conscious of selecting a certain kind of imagery to reinforce a certain of mood, etc., he cannot possibly be conscious of the interrelationships among all these equations.” In essence, a cluster analysis provides “a survey of the hills and valleys of the [rhetor’s] mind,” resulting in insights that many not even be known to or conscious for the rhetor. (63-64)

I will base my Cluster Criticism on the following questions: “How does Baraka use art to create his black identity, and in what way(s) is this approach problematic?”

There are three theoretical ideas that are developed in this book. The first is the *reclamation of victimization*. The *reclamation of victimization* argues that victims can gain affirming identity by reclaiming and renaming their past pain and using it to create a better self. In *Race Matters* Cornel West critiques black liberals’ use victimization by stating that it “adhere[s] to a victim-status conception of black people that results in blaming all personal failings of black people on white racism” (75). My idea of the *reclamation of victimization* does not blame or absolve white racism as I see “blaming” as externally focused. Rather, the *reclamation of victimization* calls for a turning inward of black identity to speak to itself about

³ Foss defines artifact as “the text, trace, or tangible evidence of the act” (7).

⁴ See Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism* (63-120) for her discussion on Cluster Criticism.

itself. Black identity speaking to itself about itself acknowledges the historical pain of the past while offering comfort to that pain. My contention is that affirming black identity must speak to its own painful history but not be constituted as a victim by others. Rather the *reclamation of victimization* allows black identity to self-define by saying what it was, is, and will be. Cornel West writes that, “While black people have never been simply victims, wallowing in self-pity and begging for white giveaways, they have been—and are— *victimized*. Therefore, to call on black people to be agents makes sense only if we also examine the dynamics of this victimization against which their agency will, in part, be exercised” (22). West’s turn toward societal dialogue is important and necessary in the healing process of black identity. What makes my call different is that I would like to see a corresponding internal call where the victim turns inside to speak with herself before turning outward.

I will explore the problems associated with *replicating a negative* as my next theoretical position. By *replicating a negative* I mean taking what is destructive about white society and applying it to black identity. It is my contention that one of the issues faced by Du Bois, Locke, and Baraka is that they recreate the paradigms of patriarchy, classism, and for Baraka violence in their movement toward black identity. Cornel West writes of the black-middle classes inclusion in this country’s recent economic booms that it has resulted “in new kinds of personal turmoil and existential meaninglessness in black America” (56). My argument is that in order for affirming black identity to exist, it must seek to create paradigms that reject hierarchy, include women and people who have different sexual orientations, and be non-violent. What *replicating a negative* is trying to critique and change is described by Cornel West below. He writes:

Post-modern culture is more and more a market culture dominated by gangster mentalities and self-destructive wantonness. This culture engulfs all of us—yet its impact on the disadvantaged is devastating, resulting in extreme violence in everyday life. Sexual violence against women and homicidal assaults by young black men on one another are only the most obvious signs of this empty quest for pleasure, property, and power. (10)

My final theoretical position will explore the importance of the call-response in the creation of a positive, affirming black identity. The call-response is important throughout because it is a unique mode of communication in the black community that allows for affirming intra-group, intra-racial communication to take place. The call-response is linked to the *reclamation of victimization* because it grants present black identity the possibility to be in dialogue with past black identity (and sometimes it will be a past black identity rooted in pain), this constant dialogue allows for a new, fluid, historically rooted black identity to emerge that is reflective of both past and present. My final chapters develop the argument that this positive tension between past and present is a marker of revolutionary black identity.

Chapter One

W. E. B. Du Bois and “The Talented Tenth”

The challenges faced by an individual to form his/her own identity have been well documented. One scholar who has explored the trial is Seyla Benhabib in *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. In her book Benhabib discusses the challenge(s) to “become a self” (15). Likewise in his remarkable work *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor does an excellent job of locating the various forces that create our conception of the modern self. In his essay “Postmodernism, Narrative, and the Question of Black Identity” Clevis Headley focuses on the tension caused due to attempts at identity formation. He writes that to “talk of identity predictably provokes intense reactions and emotions. Many persons who consider questions of identity inescapable are equal in intensity to those who are weary of identity discourse. But one thing is sure. There is no ‘infinite process of identity construction’” (45).

Headley accurately shows that without years of search, struggle and experience, it is almost impossible to come into a sense of *who one is*. Harder still is attempting to formulate a group identity out of trauma and abuse,¹ yet if an African American identity that posits itself as constitutive and positive can exist, this is what must take place. In her article “Visions of Transcendent Community in the Works of Toni Morrison,” Joy James looks at the painstaking efforts of Toni Morrison to posit a positive idea of black identity in the presence of an almost overwhelming

¹ See K. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections.”