

The Features of the Voice of African American Tradition:  
An Analysis of African American Rhetoric  
for the Influence of the Call Response Technique

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### **Introduction**

The words of Frederick Douglass; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X, and Barack Obama contain social and political commentary much like their modern-day counterparts of rap/hip hop. Although rap and hip hop songs do not solicit the same societal acclaim as the words of Douglass, King, Malcolm X, or Obama, I was struck that all these African American communicators used similar rhetorical patterns to create messages that are deeply evocative and memorable about racial, economic, and political inequity. Even spanning 150 years and different media, there seemed to be a striking similarity. It was as though one could hear different members of the same family speaking. What was this unique cultural voice in African American rhetoric? The questions which I intend to answer are: What are the specific techniques being used? Is there a common source that explains why the similarity exists?

My analysis consisted of six samples, and from this spectrum of persuasive communication, two general patterns stood out: repetition and intense emotion appeals (pathos). The most powerful “repetition” techniques include anaphora and call response. Meanwhile, the “emotional”/pathos appeals often were in the form of a jeremiad and used highly potent images, representing the objective correlative approach.

What is a possible source of the similarity that unites these communications? Jack Daniel and Geneva Smitherman suggest an answer in “How I Got Over” (26-39). They explain that the “Traditional African World View” provides a fundamental and sustaining unity for African Americans. The Traditional African World View rests on various core beliefs. One of these principles is that reality is actually a pulsing network of what some cultures would see as diametric “opposites”—for example, the group and the individual, spirit and matter, sound and silence, calm receptive listening and emotional outcry. Another core belief is that true happiness lies in both the individual and the group merged in harmony, manifesting the fundamental balance that is reality (Daniel and Smitherman 31).

This Traditional African World View forges a strong cultural identity in which the individual and group are affirmed simultaneously; this affirmation has a significant impact on African American rhetoric. Daniel and Smitherman explain that this affirmation of solidarity is experienced and expressed in a unique “call response” that can be spiritual or secular:

Communication in these churches involves 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 spiritual forces. Call-response is a fundamental communications strategy designed to bring about this sense of satisfaction. (35)

Daniel and Smitherman conclude that call-response is an important basic strategy in communication within black America, and that it is a necessary component to African American social and cultural identity (39).

My analysis will examine the possibility that “call response” is one of the underlying influences that creates the distinctive similarity in these persuasive texts. By its very nature,

effective call response must be both repetitive and emotional—and pulse with a stirring beat of action and reaction. Having experienced the moving power of call response, black communicators may want to tap into that same energy and thus favor a definite rhetorical style that stresses repetition and plays to heightening emotion.

As I explicate the six texts chronologically, examining the interplay of repetition and emotion in each, I will be especially noting how three techniques provide repetition and emotional heightening: using the “call response” itself, announcing jeremiad warnings and rallying cries, and using potent images to stir emotions—the objective correlative. These techniques—coupled with vital message of these texts—are deeply impelling as the voice of African American culture sounds forth the call to America to respond by being true to its founding principles.

During the first part of this explication process, I will follow chronologically the important influences on African American traditional patterns of communication in the first three orations. Then, in a second section, I will show the continuity with rap and hip hop as this communication beats with the rhythmical patterns from the music of slaves, spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, and soul. These rhetorical rhythmic patterns echoing down through American history give meaning to how hip hop came to be and underscore why it is a fully legitimate means of social commentary. In a final section, I will use Obama’s “Inaugural Address” as a test case, to examine how Obama uses repetition and emotional heightening—the significant features of the voice of African American tradition and its unique call response.

**Part One: The Influence of the Call Response  
in African American Orations on Social Justice**

**Background on the Three Unifying Rhetorical Techniques**

I will be focusing on three rhetorical techniques for the six texts because these three techniques function together to accentuate that the African American community has repeatedly sought to rectify American injustice through the power of the spoken word, letting the rightness of their cause for social equality speak for itself. Thus the voice of their rhetoric sounds forth as a call to America to respond by being true at last to its founding principles.

While I will be focusing on these techniques, whenever appropriate, I will also be mentioning other rhetorical techniques that imbue these texts with their energy and impact as they evoke the power of repetition and emotion that the call response itself offers.

**Objective Correlative**

All six of the texts are filled with examples of the objective correlative, a concept created by Washington Allston and first “brought into currency” (Sarah Scott) by T. S. Elliot in a critical essay of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This concept suggests that the only proper emotional expression in art is through an “objective correlative”: a situation, string of events, or a group of objects which are the recipe/formula for a particular emotion—“such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (Scott). In the texts that I am examining, through the recounting of these experiences, the orator or artist uses a specific mixture/formula of words to provoke a specific emotional response of sorrow and sometimes outraged anger at the political system which is allowing these heart-breaking injustices to occur.

## Jeremiad

Each text is also structured as a **jeremiad**. “Jeremiad” means lamentation or “doleful complaint.” It derives from the prophet Jeremiah, who warned of Israel’s destruction at the hands of the Babylonians and the destruction of the great temple in Jerusalem to punish the Israelites’ lack of commitment to the covenant. Eventually, Jeremiah’s prophesy came true: the Babylonians conquered the whole nation of Israel and deported its people to Babylonia where they were held captive for 70 years. At last, the repentant Israelites were set free, but only when their conquerors themselves were conquered—the Babylonians themselves were subjugated by Persians who allowed the Israelites to return from their exile to the “Promised Land.” Although the biblical Jeremiah deplored the actions of the Israelites and foretold of problems in the near-term, he also indicated a possibility of the nation’s restoration and repentance in the future (Howard-Pitney 5). Thus, the complete rhetorical structure of the jeremiad is three-fold: a citation of a promise, a “criticism of a present declension,” and a “resolving prophecy.”

If these rhetorical orations are an “American form” of a jeremiad, what is the three-fold parallel to the conventional jeremiad? First, what “covenant” is America founded on? What commonly held symbols, myths, and rituals coalesce America’s diverse polity into one spiritual and moral community? Second, what is the “criticism of a present declension”? Third, what is America’s “resolving prophecy”?

First, the founding covenant and mythologies Americans share are those of the Pilgrims’ arrival; the greatness of patriarchs, such as Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington; and our “sacred scripture”: the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. America bequeathed herself a glorious self image, one which promotes excesses of pride, even though “the land of the free” has never been able to live up to the transcendent mission of its founders. Second, the “criticism

of a present declension,” is that if America continues to ignore what we call “self-evident” truths—all are equal and have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—then, according to these orators and artists, America will continue to suffer pain and violence, and waste the potential of our great land and its people. But, third, there is the resolving prophesy that America will eventually be true to those founding principles and provide “freedom and justice for all.”

### **Call Response**

Finally, the texts sometimes use the uniquely African American communication pattern of the call response directly or indirectly. What gives the call response its great power? The Africans who came here as slaves were able to blend their culture with the existing one because of their strong sense of communal cohesion: they were able to preserve their personal beliefs, by allowing anyone to speak out and persevere with support of one’s own group rather than submit to the status quo of a larger society. African custom and tradition rested on a resilient sense of communal loyalty and thus provided the enduring roots of the African American cultural identity (Daniel and Smitherman 35).

This cultural cohesion allowed the preferred genres of music to blend with oratory and also provided an audience for shared communal activity. An audience or congregation would gather as interactive listeners to music, speeches, or sermons, witnessing to this inspiring communal cohesion, celebrating their strong bonds of survival, spirituality, and shared support—key components of the African communicative tradition (Daniel and Smitherman 30).

Throughout all its history, from the holds of slave ships to the oval office of the president, African American tradition has placed a heavy emphasis on the spoken or sung word. Listening to black rhetoric, the ear is caught immediately as each orator and each artist draws on these



lyrical rhythmic patterns. How were these lyrical patterns passed on so effectively? Where were they experienced and expressed most in the culture? As Daniel and Smitherman explain, one of the most vital parts of the African American oral tradition was the Sunday service at church, where the community gathered for religious practices that included preaching and singing.

### **Self-Actualization through the “Call Response”**

In black churches, through personal unique contributions, the individual is expected to contribute—and thus actualize his or her sense of self within the confines of the group—with a “call” and “response.” In such a setting, the only incorrect action is to not reciprocate, not respond at all (Daniel and Smitherman 34). In traditional black churches, there is no sharp divide between preacher and congregation; all participate, interacting through their communication because all are expected to participate as performer and listener. The process requires individual contribution in order to receive, and the act of receiving includes clearly acknowledging one another with a response (Daniel and Smitherman 34). In the tradition of the “call response,” sermons and gospel music rely on and reinforce the traditional African values of group cohesiveness, cooperation, and collective common good (Daniel and Smitherman 34).

Specifically, call response functions to unify the audience and the speaker. Black audiences are “characterized by spontaneous preacher-congregation calls and responses, hollers and shouts, intensely emotional singing, spirit possession, and extemporaneous testimonials to the power of the Holy Spirit” (Daniel and Smitherman 27). These responses are not only tolerated but are encouraged by the speaker/preacher. The audience’s participation is a conduit through which the performer feels the flow of the audience’s emotions and the power of the spirit working in the community.

### **Overview of My Chronological Explications of Each Text**

Frederick Douglass's "What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July?" and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" both question why the rights "guaranteed" by the documents written when this nation was founded, the rights deemed "unalienable" for all American citizens—are as yet unrecognized legally by the general population of the nation at the time when each speech was delivered. The orations both also recognize the nation's "civil religion"—a shared cultural identity. Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" calls for a violent revolution by the African American community, citing as justification the gross injustices suffered by black populous at the hands of the "white devil." Through a verbal whiplash of fiery rhetorical devices, Malcolm X highlights the dilemma faced by the African American community. Examining the repetition and emotional heightening in the rhetoric of Grandmaster Flash and Public Enemy also graphically underscores the same message of the gross injustice and its dehumanizing effects endured by the black American community. In his "Inaugural Address," Obama witnesses to a profound shift as he proclaims that America is attempting to enter "a new era of responsibility," attested to by the unprecedented historical event that "a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath."

All the texts highlight the inequality in America because the orators and artists all ask "When will we be truly free from injustice?" Although I intend to explicate the span of a century and a half of information, the same issues remain brutally similar throughout: the rights of an American and the need to achieve social equality for all Americans. I will be discussing how the speeches and music employ classical rhetorical strategies and appeals with the purpose of unifying the supporters of each man's cause, igniting them to become instigators of social change—for Douglass: abolition; for King: civil rights; for X: radical rebellion; for Public

Enemy and Grandmaster Flash: acknowledging the harsh results of continuing inequality; for Obama, acting with “a new responsibility” to “rebuild America.”

### **1. Frederick Douglass: “What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July?” —July 5, 1852**

“What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July?” set the tone of the abolitionist movement and ignited the fervor of its supporters. In this oration, notably his most famous speech, Frederick Douglass illustrates the scholarship he brought to his work, though he was never schooled formally. The oration took place in Rochester, New York, in 1852, on the *fifth* of July, due to the fourth being a Sunday. Douglass took advantage of the date change and created a powerful black protest. While white Americans could savor their Fourth of July, celebrating with “joy” the independence their forefathers had fought for and written into the founding documents, he pointed out the hypocrisy of America’s promise of independence. This independence promised by the forebears of the nation was denied to black Americans.

Douglass crafted the speech for maximum impact on a much broader audience than just his listeners that day, most of whom were pro-abolitionist. He designed the speech especially for those who would read it in print or hear it proclaimed later.

Much of Douglass’s oratorical style resonates with the call response rhetorical patterns of Southern black preachers as he calls out a series of questions to his audience. As a slave, he had seen black ministers sway their congregations during religious revivals; he was familiar with the rhythmic grace and evocative content of black popular religion. However, this audience did not call back as individuals would have in the call-response setting of a black church; instead, Douglass metaphorically hears the response to his words as not “hallelujahs” or “jubilant shouts,” but a “mournful wail of millions” in chains.

Douglass also draws on his unusual asset of having a second cultural heritage from his experiences as a free individual in New England. This dual identity allowed Douglass to use the scriptural Babylonian story to its greatest effect, as a jeremiad to affect to both black and white audiences.

Of the six texts, Douglass was able to use the jeremiad most directly because his audience knew the story of Jeremiah and the Babylonian Captivity so well. When Douglass mentions just the word “Babylon,” the full impact of the historical events resonated with his mixed audience. With the single name, Douglass evokes the devastation that slavery has inflicted on the African American psyche and will inflict on America as a whole.

Cast as part of the Babylonian story, any slaves in America could draw the parallel between themselves and the Israelites as they suffered captivity in a foreign land. Meanwhile, recalling the story of the freeing of the Israelites, the Anglo-Protestants in Douglass’s audience would have to acknowledge what role they would play as Douglass summed the powerful social metaphors of fall of the Babylonians—evoking the might of God to unseat the powerful and shatter complacency in favor of the righteous ones in exile. Thus, Douglass warned America of her own form of jeremiad—in rhetoric marked by indignation, dissatisfaction, and a call to challenge the nation to change the circumstances immediately. For example:

There is a point beyond which human endurance cannot go. The crushed worm may yet turn under the heel of the oppressor. I warn them [the slaveholders], then with all solemnity, and in the name of retributive justice, to look to their ways; for in an evil hour, those sable arms that have, for the last two centuries, been engaged in cultivating and adorning the fair fields of our country, may yet become an instrument of terror, desolation, and death, throughout our borders.

In this speech, Douglass also took advantage of the increased zeal of the Northern abolitionist movement ignited by the Fugitive Slave Act. Responding to this fervor, he explicitly declared his hatred for slavery and its corresponding denial of the African Americans' rights.

Just as the other five texts will refer to America's failure to keep her promises, Douglass also delivers a verbal whiplash with mockery and irony employed to stir the audience to disdain the practices of America. He exposed the hypocrisy of "celebrating liberty in a nation that condoned slavery" (Burke 83). He delivered a brutal attack on those who pretended that every American enjoyed the promise of liberty set forth in the founding documents.

To further his argument, Douglass uses the rhetorical device of emphasis through repetition; repeatedly using the term "your" to set up a dichotomy between the "your" of white Americans in contrast to African Americans who, whether they were free or still in bondage, still did not enjoying the privileges granted by America to their fellow countrymen and women. African Americans were discriminated against socially, politically, and economically.

Then Douglass extends the "your" to "your fathers." "He saw himself seeing families whose forebears had given them the gift of liberty." The recipients of that liberty were a disappointment since they didn't do for their children as their fathers had done (Burke 84). "The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not me" (Douglass). Douglass implied that the forebears of our country prepared for an egalitarian society, but the generation whom Douglass addressed had yet to help perpetuate those democratic principles.

Throughout the oration, Douglass employs antithesis, especially during the introduction. "The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, it has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn" In sympathy with the slaves

rather than the anticipated jubilant audience, he continues: “To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.” As noted by Burke, he pairs “fetters” and “illuminated temple” and “joyous anthem” pairs with “inhuman mockery.” These antithetical images are strongly emotive, meant to stir the audience’s feelings as one of Douglass’s “pathos appeals.” This antithetic, emotive passage is also—as noted by Duffy—saturated with a double irony since Douglass is no longer physically a slave in fetters or being physically forced (as a slave might be) to speak on that occasion. Yet, psychologically, the same racial prejudice that made slavery possible caused Douglass and other African Americans to be bound by the invisible fetters of the Jim Crow discriminatory practices of the North. “He thus came to the conclusion that the social and political implications of such racism were even more significant than the problem of slavery” (Duffy 6).

Interlaced in the oration’s antithesis and other rhetorical devices is irony:

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability and could I reach the Nation’s ear, I would to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke.

In his oratory, Douglass employs irony as a strategic response; according to Duffy, Douglass uses his irony to reach a much broader audience. It is here that Douglass utilizes paralipsis, “arguing points that are so obvious that they do not require argument—that the slave is a man, that slavery is wrong” (Duffy 6). According to Ericson, Douglass claims the antislavery credo is so “plain there is nothing to be argued” (Ericson). He explains how slavery is *prima facie* wrong, through the blending of Protestant and liberal values. He notes that if slaves are men, then slavery is wrong; if it is wrong to treat men like brutes, then slavery is wrong; if men

enjoy a natural right to freedom, then slavery is wrong; and if the institution does not enjoy divine sanction, then slavery is wrong. According to Douglass, each of these propositions is plainly a true premise; hence, slavery must be wrong. He goes on to say that those who support the institution are supporting it out of ignorance because they believe it to be a just institution. He also suggests that they must be supporting it for their own selfish gain because they are willing to go against their own religious principles for personal profit.

As a “resolving prophesy,” Douglass highlights the forces that will inevitably force the downfall of slavery:

In the fervent aspirations of William Lloyd Garrison, I say and let every heart join in saying it:

God speed the year of jubilee  
 The wide world o'er  
 When from their galling chains set free,  
 Th' oppresse'd shall vilely bend the knee,  
 And wear the yoke of tyranny  
 Like brutes no more.  
 That year will come, and freedom's reign,  
 To man his plundered rights again  
 Restore.

Though the speech mostly used the scorching rhetoric of the jeremiad, in this conclusion of his oration, Douglass softened slightly the lashes of his words to allow the romantic era's traditional expansive oratory homage.

## **2. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “I Have a Dream” —August 28, 1963**

As an indication of the continuity between Douglass’s pre-Civil War speech and my next text, King’s “I Have a Dream,” look at the fate of Atlanta, Georgia. There, Douglass’s dire prediction of destruction most clearly came to pass. At the end of the Civil War, the proud city of Atlanta, Georgia was burned and left in smoldering embers. Following the Civil War, the reconstruction of the 1880’s was marked by an economic recession, which hindered progress on the civil rights of the African Americans. Yet only forty years later, in Atlanta in 1929 was born a meek preacher: Martin Luther King, Jr.

This preacher delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington. Both his speech and Frederick Douglass’s questioned: “Where are these rights promised by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution?” Currently, the South was again in turmoil. Their rights which their fathers and grandfathers had so vigorously fought for were in jeopardy. The Ku Klux Klan terrorized black churches and black communities. Lynching and discrimination were the norm, and George Wallace’s “segregation forever” was in full force.

Noted as one of the greatest speeches in American history, King’s “I Have a Dream” was proclaimed in Washington D.C. August 28, 1963, a century after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Lincoln. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King began slowly, using anaphora as his most effective rhetorical strategy throughout the speech, for example "I have a dream..." is used eight times and "Let freedom ring," nine times. Other repeated phrases are "Now is the time..." (4), "One hundred years later" (4), "We can never be satisfied" (4), "With this faith" (3), and "Free at last" (3).



The speech took place on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, which has a certain poetic symbolism and importance because of Lincoln's role as the "Great Liberator," and King underscores this need for liberation by the repeated references to Lincoln throughout the speech. His first reference to Lincoln is:

Six score years ago, a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand today signed the Emancipation Proclamation. . . . a momentous decree came as a great beacon of hope to millions of Negro slaves, who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. [But still] the Negro is . . . an exile in his own land.

These first two paragraphs clearly set up the objective correlative by describing a specific scenario with cultural significance for African Americans; the reference to the bondage they were freed from one hundred years prior. He also recalls biblical references to captivity and exile—true jeremiad language that parallels Douglass's.

Since the speech was delivered at a civil rights demonstration demanding economic equality for African Americans, King continued on with a check metaphor, by saying that "America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" This metaphor is an economic one, appealing to the current economic inequality suffered by African Americans. It was a simple metaphor, specific to the culture, specifically proportional to the subject. He earlier had referenced another economic metaphor, one of Lincoln's, "earning their bread by the sweat of another man's brow" which is also a Biblical reference, Genesis 3:19, "By the sweat of your brow, you will produce food to eat until you return to the ground, because you were taken from it. You are dust, and you will return to

dust." Again, we have an echo of the African American toil that built America—recalling images of toil that Douglass used, ones that will also be evoked by Malcolm X.

With metaphors to ignite the audience's emotions, King continues with "this is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism." Lincoln was notably a gradualist; King's rejection of gradualism is emphasized by the exigency and *kairos* of the speech. In this statement, King specifically warns against gradualism. The crowd and the nation recognized King's worries of the movement stopping there, and responded by allaying his apprehension: they would continue to ask for the equality they deserved.

Anaphora is repeatedly used, and serves as a "call" to those who might be stirred to respond to the profound toll of the years: "But one hundred years later the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination . . . One hundred years later, the Negro still languishes in the corners of American society . . ." Again King employs anaphora when he says "Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time . . ." King continues the anaphora, "We cannot walk alone....We cannot turn back . . .We can never be satisfied. . . ."

This section employs anaphora to carry the audience along a crescendo of words to heighten the rhetorical effectiveness and also adds the objective correlative (dark, desolate versus "sunlit path" and so on); evoking the listeners' emotions as King's words climb upwards and thus amplify a pathos appeal.

Now, comes the moment when call and response possibly has the greatest impact on the speech. By visual analysis of the videotapes of King's speech, we see that he used call response

to uplift the audience and unify them. At this moment, the emotional involvement of the audience in “I Have a Dream” allowed King to veer from his written speech. Similar to his experience in the pulpit, he could sense the Spirit was present, and he and his newly formed “congregation” needed a sermon as a means of unifying into one community.

The moment of the shift came just after King said, “I say to you today, my friends, that even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow. I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.”

It has been suggested that here King began to partly improvise what he would say about that dream, as a response to the call of Mahalia Jackson when she cried out: “Tell them about the dream, Martin!” King explained later that he “forgot the rest of the speech” and just spoke what “came to me” (Branch 882). King continues using anaphora, now semi-extemporaneously, in the “I have a dream” repetition, as his description of the dream resonates not only with emotional appeals, but with additional poignancy because within the repetition is the very point of the speech: America has heard this dream before. The dream which African Americans have is not an outlandish one, which requires that they are better than white citizens; no, their dream is the American dream, the same dream of equality and inalienable rights found in the founding documents of this great nation.

His final use of anaphora is his repetition of “let freedom ring” from the “snowcapped mighty mountains of New York . . . from every hill and mole hill of Mississippi.” This echoes the necessity of freedom being a right of every citizen, regardless of where anyone may be. His mention of the Stone Mountain of Georgia is also a reference to the Civil War because of the famous Stone Mountain Civil War monument.

The ringing metaphor is used here to denote the liberty bell, again an auditory image as a metaphor to freedom and the founders. His use of metaphor throughout the speech goes back to the “now is the time . . .” archetypal metaphor, a metaphor which is effective across cultural lines, (e.g. dark is to light). Archetypal metaphors are unifying by crossing cultural barriers, and are by far the most effective because they can be understood by the broadest audience. Again, in reference to Shakespeare, another archetypal metaphor is laced into his oration, “the sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is not an end, but a beginning.” As King creates images and emotions within the minds and hearts of the audience, his experience as a pastor allows for his extemporaneous veering from his written speech, to create an utterly brilliant, beautiful speech which epitomizes the African American transition from “the old words of the Negro Spiritual” to the audience who can be heard calling back to him in the background as he speaks.

King notes “when all God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’” This rallying cry serves as an emotive, unifying element of the speech and also recalls the African American rhetorical tradition of the call response, as it has undergone a metamorphosis from the backbreaking labor of the fields of the plantation, to the storytelling of the cramped dwellings of the slave huts on these plantations, to the African American churches with spirit-filled members, to the national outcry for all to be united in the tradition.

One of the most powerful ethos appeals used by King was the use of “my people” as though his audience was a flock, and he the shepherd. Like Jesus, leading his followers, this preacher now had a congregation of 200,000, shouting “hallelujah” and “amen” in agreement.

His aura united them, he felt “the call”; they responded, and this audience’s reaction was their part of the “call response.” The moment was now, and the time was right, this was the ultimate in kairos. He broke free from the shackles of his written words: “I am not unmindful of that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations.” He continued to speak, allowing those listening to feel his emotions rise and fall with every word. They rejoiced at his ideas, and they responded with great passion as he led them as a shepherd guiding a flock.

King also intones: “My country ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, to thee I sing.” The importance of song and music cannot be underplayed in this speech, the bluesy quality of his voice and the rhythm of the words. One can remember again that this music comes from the African American tradition changing as it marks the centuries—the blues style being a modernized form of the slave song which accompanied them through the African American churches, comforting them as they left their heritage in Africa, longing for its drums and sung narrative.

Both orations, of Douglass and King, were noted as having implications that not only carried their movements forward, but empowered the African American community—just as the call response does. The two speeches employ rhetorical strategies which reach the audience on an emotional level using pathos appeals. For example, in Douglass’s speech, his use of figurative language ignites the audiences’ senses and releases an emotional response. For King’s speech, the dream which he speaks of is a unifying one, one which resonated in the heart of each individual present and for each individual ever to read or hear the speech in an excerpt or in its entirety. The speech is noted to have caused the audience to have tears streaming from their eyes by its end, but the speech moved King himself—a great speech moves the orator, and this speech did. The two orations employ logical appeals or logoi through their arguments for equality for

black citizens which have been promised in the founding documents, but have thus far been denied.

Just as Douglass uses the ethos appeal of his foreign experience such as ambassador to Haiti and his experiences in England to add to his remarkable scholarship, King's ethos is undeniable by the fact he is a preacher, crusading for the equality of black citizens through the moral endeavor of nonviolent protest in a quest to achieve the equality which they deserved. They refer to great Americans and their work in the foundation of equality for Americans, King's speech mentions Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, and Douglass's, Jefferson and his involvement in the writing of the founding documents.

The two speeches are successful also because of the underlying theme of unification between the violent and non-violent sides of both movements. In Frederick Douglass's case, he attempted to unify the violent pole of the pro-abolitionist movement and his own, non-violent stance which later resulted in the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. The groups which Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech calls to unify are not only the white Americans, but a call to the violent side of the civil rights spectrum, represented in the analysis and explication by Malcolm X's "Ballot or the Bullet."

### **3. Malcolm X: "The Ballot or the Bullet"—April 3, 1964**

Malcolm X represents the more militant and violent end of the civil rights movement continuum. In his oration "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X employs a jeremiad that poses the question about which of the two would be the most advantageous choice of a black to change the political present into a more just future. His speech functions as a highly personal face-to-face call to the audience, addressing them as "you" (247 times) and including himself as "we"

(111) and “I” (86). He also addresses Brother Louis Lomax, a more moderate civil rights advocate, six times. As in a typical call response in a church setting, he reminds the audience of their shared identity because all blacks were going to “catch hell” together.

His jeremiad was an “exhortatory harangue deploring the straying chosen people’s misconduct while keeping faith in their ultimate redemption” (Howard-Pitney). X adheres to the traditional jeremiad by denouncing the actions of white Americans and making known the threat of divine retribution. He prophesied the white race’s looming destruction and their eternal damnation.

As alluded to by Howard-Pitney, the jeremiad posits two possible outcomes, one of the redemption of the chosen people and an alternate possibility which is that they would lose their covenantal status and the promise would be an enduring destruction of the promise unless they repent immediately. Howard Pitney continues by explaining that the universe ultimately is the deciding factor of the chosen people’s destiny which is dependent upon their actions and choices. Malcolm’s jeremiad sheds light on the possibility of the two austere possible outcomes, but the ultimate conclusion is that the chosen people will choose rightly, and thus enjoy the resulting divine promise (168).

Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” calls for African Americans to exercise their right to vote and cautions the American government to cease disallowing blacks full equality. If this demand was not met, blacks would have no other choice but to take up arms against the forces preventing them from achieving justice.

Malcolm X was a spokesman for the Nation of Islam, a radical Black Nationalist religious organization which—unlike its counterpart of the Civil Rights Movement—called for

segregation in lieu of integration. “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech emphasizes the common experiences of African Americans of all faiths, ultimately uniting African Americans:

It's time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem—a problem that will make you catch hell whether you're a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim, or a nationalist. Whether you're educated or illiterate, whether you live on the boulevard or in the alley, you're going to catch hell just like I am.

Malcolm X pointed out that the 1964 election was an important one: despite that the Democratic Party and President Johnson claimed to be for the Civil Rights Movement, they had failed in making any genuine actions to prove this. Malcolm noted in his speech that his black brethren were becoming “politically mature” and could use this growing savvy to their advantage to swing an election in their favor. He lashed out against the government, blaming “them” for the inequality experienced by African Americans. Malcolm argued that the government had “failed the Negro” because even though segregation was outlawed and thus segregationists were breaking the law, police and other government agencies ignored the law and still practiced segregation.

His speech also transforms the meaning of “civil rights” to being a matter of “human rights,” which elevated the issue from a national to an international level. He shifted the moral imperative of rights as he escalates “asking Uncle Sam to treat you right,” to human rights: “your God-given rights” and “the rights that are recognized by all nations of this earth.” He alluded to his black nationalism, which ultimately meant his support of African Americans governing their own communities. Only through African Americans governing their own



communities could the vices of their communities be removed which included alcoholism, crime, and drug abuse.

The speech provides examples of anaphora, epistrophe, and repetition. Repetition is by far the most used rhetorical device. He also uses metaphor and enthymeme as modes of creating unity among blacks. One of the rhetorical devices Malcolm X uses is metonymy, which is when an attribute of something stands in for the thing itself. The first example of this is the phrase “ballot or bullet” to stand in for the two possible outcomes that lie ahead: voting or violence.

An example of Malcolm X’s use of anaphora is towards the beginning of the speech, when he is explaining his purpose in being there: “I’m not here tonight to discuss my religion. I’m not here to try and change your religion. I’m not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about.” By repeating “I’m not here” at the beginning of the successive phrases, he is emphasizing the reason why he is there, which was to unite African Americans from all walks of life. Another example of anaphora is “I’m not a politician, not even a student of politics; in fact, I’m not a student of much of anything. I’m not a Democrat. I’m not a Republican, and I don’t even consider myself an American.” Here he is highlighting that he is first, and foremost, an African.

One of the examples of his use of epistrophe is “Being here in America doesn’t make you an American. Being born here in America doesn’t make you an American . . . They don’t have to pass civil-rights legislation to make a Polack an American.” Here, X emphasizes that they should not consider themselves Americans, because they have been grossly denied the rights which are those of Americans. His use of repetition is especially important when he recites the number of African Americans residing in America: “22 million.” Through repetition of this number, he is able to emphasize the sheer quantity of those who should be part of his movement. He also repeats “victim” and forms of “America” to highlight the victimization of the African Americans

present in America. He also uses metaphor to describe the political maturation of African Americans, and the necessity to practice their right to vote in order to benefit their interests:

“These 22 million victims are waking up. Their eyes are coming open. They're beginning to see what they used to only look at.” Through this metaphor, he is uniting the African Americans in their knowledge of how they can indeed change their political landscape.

The purpose of his speech is twofold; he intended to distance himself from the Nation of Islam, as a means of reaching out to the more moderate civil rights leaders. He also indicated that he still supported the self-defense of blacks, which reflected his still strong ties to his past beliefs. Concerning self-defense, he states:

I'm nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with me. But when you drop that violence on me, then you've made me go insane, and I'm not responsible for what I do. And that's the way every Negro should get. Any time you know you're within the law, within your legal rights, within your moral rights, in accord with justice, then die for what you believe in. But don't die alone. Let your dying be reciprocal. This is what is meant by equality. What's good for the goose is good for the gander.

Douglass, King, and Malcolm X unquestionably fought for legally recognized equality—an equality that was only partially provided when President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law on July 2, 1964. But in 1965, as in 1868, the opportunity for radical change once again diminished. In both centuries, the acceleration of black demands and expectations were not match by an acceleration of implementing reform. The whites of the North had been touched by the story of Douglass, and did overthrow Jim Crow. However, economic reforms were not as quick to be supported. Only with genuine economic reforms would African Americans be participating in a true democracy.

## **Part Two: The Influence of the Call Response in Rap/Hip Hop Songs about Social Justice**

### **Background on the Call Response in African American Music**

The orators whom I have already analyzed were deeply influenced by their African American culture. A vital component of that culture is music and the musical form of the call response. Hip hop is the grandchild of earlier forms of African American music. It is a combination of the genres which preceded it; as evidenced through the parallels between the genres. In this section, I will be discussing how African American music and the musical form of the call response have contributed to the quest for social equality.

Music has always been a defining aspect of African American culture; ever since the passage of the slaves from West Africa to the New World. Through their music, the first African Americans were able to keep their sense of their African identity.

Music gave a sense of power, of control. If it did not improve the material being of its creators, it certainly did have an impact upon their psychic state and emotional health. It allowed them to assert themselves and their feelings and their values, to communicate continuously with themselves and their peers and their oppressors as well. They could partly drop their masks and the pretense and say what they felt, articulate what was brimming up within them and what they desperately needed to express (Daniel and Smitherman 27).

Black secular song, along with other forms of the oral tradition, allowed African Americans to express themselves communally and individually, to derive great aesthetic pleasure, to perpetuate traditions, to keep values from eroding, and to begin to create new expressive modes (Levine 297), (Daniel and Smitherman 27).

The first examples of African American music were during the period of slavery where songs were sung on plantations. From Africa, the slaves brought over “whooping” and “hollering,” which were originally in Africa a means of melodically calling out to one another to announce an emergency or important news. According to Conyers, these calls could travel extended distances. The purpose of these calls was to express deep emotional experiences such as lovesickness, hunger, or loneliness. These calls were a combination of song and spoken words. These melodic calls were performed in a free and extemporaneous manner (Conyers 46).

The call-response structure of these melodic cries was the important opportunity to manipulate time, text, and pitch. These structures served in later forms of African American music as a foundation for musical transition and rhythmic tension. Examples of other changes in these calls were also in African American religious music. Slaves would change the Protestant hymns and psalms into a style completely their own, altering the structure, lyrics, rhythm, and melody. For example, as noted by Conyers, the verse structure of the songs would be changed into the call response structure or into a repetitive chorus. The original English words of the song were interwoven with extemporaneous “solos of shouts, moans, groans, and cries” (Conyers 46).

Occasionally during slavery, slave owners would allow their slaves to have dances. These dances celebrated the peak of planting season. These dances became one way to pass on African cultural traits from one generation to the next. Whites did not understand the purpose of these festivals, so blacks found them an opportune time to fully express their “Africanness.” Eventually, African American music gave rise to cultural uniformity; over time, there developed a common performance style of dance and song. This style transcended the ethnic lines among the blacks so that despite their differences in language and personal experiences, blacks unified through the pronounced rhythms of the music they created for their own encouragement.

In this shared culture, African Americans understood and experienced with one another the ills of society: discrimination, racism, and segregation. Part of what allowed for uniformity of culture was mitigating these shared negative experiences by sharing them. As Daniel and Smitherman also explained, within this culture, community and spirituality are highly valued (27). Providing uniformity and community, the spiritual also passed down through generations their traditional African music.

According to Conyers, spirituals were a product of improvisation and communal consciousness. Spirituals were created from many existing songs, embellished with new musical accompaniment and lyrics that fit into the traditional metrical pattern. This example of simultaneous group activity was an important aspect of their communal sense of self. The impetus of the spiritual was a driving force of creativity. The process of changing the songs into something specific for the community is known as “communal recreativity” which is defined as a folk process of recreating older songs into new entities.

The spiritual used traditional African religious structures—such as the call response—brought directly from Africa. With its repetition and consistently intricate percussive rhythm, the call response pattern has an almost hypnotic effect. The spirituals could take place at both sacred and secular occasions, from churches or praise houses, rowing songs, field songs, work songs, and social song. The spiritual also drew on the important older worldviews among the slaves, and this perpetual testimony gave them a strong sense of community (Conyers 48).

Giving blacks an outlet to express their individual feelings, spirituals also simultaneously built an ever stronger communal identity by offering solace through shared experiences. The most persistent image in spirituals was that the slaves, the blacks, were the chosen people, similar to the Israelites.

From the spiritual came the blues. The specific date or means of creation cannot be precisely pinpointed. The blues contain African traditional musical elements, such as allusive lyrics, improvisation, and the call response seen in black choral singing (Daniel and Smitherman 37). Often containing commentary on current events; the blues made work pass more easily. The “blues combine musical structure and poetic forms from the spirituals, work songs, and field cries with new musical and textual ideas” (Conyers 49).

The sense of occasion is an extremely important aspect of African American culture. These occasions and celebrations there are reminders of their African past kept through African cultural practices. Their sense of their African identity was passed down through generations through their collective participation in the community. (Daniel and Smitherman 32) The blues, as do other genres of African American music, criticized the “social substance of society, and ultimately contributed towards giving direction to the social reconstruction of that society” (Conyers 84).

From the blues came jazz. The style of jazz tells a story, displays emotions, and tries to elicit a response from the listeners. The improvisational aspect of jazz music is mirrored in the hip hop “freestyle” when a rapper improvises lyrically. Like jazz before it, hip hop was originally a type of dance music. Like jazz, hip hop shifts its focus from the artist’s personal reflection to the artist’s surroundings. Like jazz, hip hop thrives on rhythm in the melody and lyrics.

“Rap” is the steady succession of words used as lyrics in hip hop songs. In hip hop, each line of the rap when spoken moves away from symmetry and the length of each phrase varies. These are some of the same elements that are used by jazz performers.

The hip hop movement came out of the post-industrial decline of the United States. Urban areas grew poorer and hip hop was born. Many young African Americans had troubled lives. They used small dance parties as a means of diverting themselves. At these parties, there would be a DJ, who would select songs to dance to. DJs entertained the young dancers, and the demand for DJs increased (Ramsey 228). Many of these DJs were immigrants from the Caribbean as was Grandmaster Flash. Reggae became popular during the late 1960s; through the 1970s, the sound of classic reggae's root style changed into the DJ style.

Ramsey explains that DJs would play a track with no vocals on it, and afterwards the DJs would encourage their audiences to dance. The talk over the tracks eventually began to have a range of topics, most of which were self-conscious and socially minded (228). This Caribbean style of music was easy and fun for young African Americans to reproduce.

In early rap and hip hop, the DJ would play two vinyl discs simultaneously and repeat a "break" without pausing. A break is a short attractive phrase of usually twenty to thirty seconds. Its sources ranged from popular music, to white rock, and black traditional music. "Repeating the break" soon became known as "sampling." The technique of "scratching" also became popular and widely used by DJs. Scratching was a rhythmic noise made by using the cushion of a finger to turn a record the opposite direction. DJs would revise original tracks using a mixer and a rhythm machine.

Moving away from popular music's "lyrics for entertainment;" in rap and hip hop, the words tend to tell short stories of social messages, following the lead of other African American music after the 60s by carrying a social message. Electric Modern Blues, as well as a traditional blues, had song lyrics which were "individual and sentimental." In soul and funk music, after the 1960's, social mindedness was emphasized in the lyrics as the African American artists

responded to the call for immediate social change. Little by little, the political statements of musicians and listeners caught the attention of white Americans.

The first hit of rap music came in 1979, with the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." Its tunes were simple; it used "ebonics," the vernacular of the inner city. The words are regarded as "a stupid tall tale from the general literary standing," but the audience appreciated the world of the DJ-like art.

Because this art form simplified making one's own tracks, young people who had no money or training could produce their own rap/hip hop recordings.

The revolutionary aspect of "rap" is to have the presentation itself be the emotional focal point, a concept with roots deep in the African American culture. As Ramsey explains, a myriad of thematic and stylistic ancestors of rap are "[f]ound in children's games, double-dutch chants, and black vernacular preaching styles" (165). Through "raps," the lyrics of hip hop, these urban young African Americans could express their local affiliations and their identities (165).

Many rap lyrics paint a picture of urban daily life. Black culture places a high regard on creatively expressing people's real life experiences. Hip hop remains true to its cultural roots by promoting African values within their communities. Conyers states that as people of African descent struggled with enslavement, racist oppression, and intellectual bondage, their art and creative outlets tried to reflect the reality of the movement toward black liberation (86).

In their lyrics, rappers boast about themselves, jousting with rhymes about abuse and scandals on the streets, as well as mocking the snobs and squares in their community. Called "signifyin," this playful verbal exchange taunts others, daring them to top it. Because rap was born as a means of entertainment for inner-city youth, it is not always socially minded. But rap rhymes are genuinely "black" in their nature because of the language employed. These



nonsensical word games with less serious, rhymes-for-just-entertainment eventually evolved into socially conscious rhymes as rappers became fully aware of the power of their words on their audience and therefore began to use their rhymes as calls for reform.

Communal and self-actualizing, rap is valued by how extemporaneous its composer is. To “freestyle” means to improvise rap lyrics, performing them on the spot either a cappella or with instrumental beats to a group of individuals who will take turns freestyling.

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement gradually improved the conditions of inner-city living—gains that continued through the 1970s and 1980s because of the social minority’s voice becoming stronger in politics.

### **Overview of My Chronological Explications of Each Rap Hip Hop Song**

The two important songs in the hip hop movement are Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message” and Public Enemy’s “Don’t Believe the Hype.” Grandmaster Flash’s song contains sometimes half-joking rhymes, but the underlying social commentary is glaringly serious. Similar to other African American movements before them, the two groups represent the two poles of black consciousness regarding how to address the problem of inequity in their daily lives. One is the side of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Six: they use narrative sequencing to bring the conditions of the inner city to a greater audience, in hopes of being a catalyst of change. Representing the other side is Public Enemy: a group that represents the more aggressive and accusing end of the social continuum.

#### 4. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Six: “The Message” —1982

Grandmaster Flash’s message is an “in your face” immersion into the inequalities faced by inner-city African Americans in their day to day experiences. An objective correlative, the song begins by explaining the situation in which he finds himself:

Broken glass everywhere  
 People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care  
 I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise no more  
 Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice  
 Rats in the front room, roaches in the back  
 Junkies in the alley with the baseball bat  
 I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far.

Akin to the jeremiad’s doleful complaint, Flash describes the atrocious living conditions which he and other African Americans endure while living in the inner-cities of America—a situation which he cannot escape. Again African Americans are shackled to an existence which leaves them questioning where their rights as Americans have gone.

He continues to explain the economic implications of his life:

The bill collectors they ring my phone  
 And scare my wife when I'm not home  
 Got a bum education, double-digit inflation  
 I can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station

Although he attempts to better his situation, Flash explains that the odds are stacked against him: “Cause it's all about money, ain't a damn thing funny / You got to have a con in this land of milk and honey” He alludes to America being the Promised Land, a land overflowing

with prosperity. And yet, amidst this alleged perfection, he finds himself in the throes of economic instability; and despite his attempts to better his situation, he finds himself, as well as his peers, turning to crime. With no escape offered by the “bum” educational system available to African Americans in the inner city, they are forced into a sordid lifestyle just to get by.

The song offers a jeremiad-like warning as Grandmaster Flash goes on to describe the life of a child born into this sorrowful state:

God is smiling on you but he's frowning too

Because only God knows what you'll go through

You'll grow in the ghetto, living second rate

And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate

Born into desperate economic turmoil, the child could respond by hating the system which mandates such a life. So the child grows up admiring

All the number book takers

Thugs, pimps, pushers and the big money makers

Driving big cars, spending twenties and tens

And you wanna grow up to be just like them, huh,

Smugglers, scrambles, burglars, gamblers

Pickpockets, peddlers even panhandlers

Flash describes how a child cannot see any way out except crime, since only conmen actually achieve any monetary gain in their community. He describes how the individual does not want to grow up to be like these people but ends up just like them, unemployed, a high school dropout who turns to crime and does prison time. But in prison, the individual is abused and eventually is found hanged in a cell.

The hearth-wrenching lyrics of this song are meant to stir listeners to empathize with the real life conditions faced by all the people who live in the inner city ghettos: how although the singers and listeners do not want to go down the same road, crime seems to be the only means to better their situation. The song is meant to help those who do not live in these conditions to realize the foul reality their American brethren find themselves in. In a land of promises of economic and social equality, there still exists this absolutely horrible state of living.

Grandmaster Flash's message was about how only the strong survive. This insight can certainly be applied to hip hop itself because it embodies the African American cultural cohesion: In spite of everything thrown against them, the community still survives, not only survives, but is stronger than before. This is victory in the highest order.

### **5. Public Enemy: "Fight the Power" —1990**

Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" calls for unity among blacks in order to change to the system which is keeping them from realizing their rights as Americans, and like Malcolm X, uses threats to convey this jeremiad warning. One such threat is "our freedom of speech is freedom or death. We gotta fight the powers that be." Here, Public Enemy states that the right of freedom of speech is so important that without this freedom, they would rather be dead, reminiscent of X's "It'll be liberty, or it will be death," a twist on Patrick Henry's lauded patriotism of "Give me liberty or give me death."

Public Enemy rails against the powers of a government which systematically denies civil liberty even though "people are all the same," paraphrasing the American ideal of "all men are created equal."

Public Enemy declares that “we need awareness, we can’t get careless”—a tight rhyme scheme that facilitates sharing the call to stay united and strong against the social system which is inflicting injustices upon them.

Public Enemy now uses classic call response directly: “Let me hear you say, we gotta fight the powers that be.” This is calling the audience to agree with them—and in their agreement respond back to them with the chorus of “fight the powers that be.”

In a mass of verses, that evoke the vivid imagery of the objective correlative, Public Enemy beats home the point: as proud African American, they are still unable to recognize all the same liberties as other Americans.

As my explication has shown, rap as a musical style is grounded in the communal power of words. Demonstrating an important appeal to wide base, rap allows people to communicate under the radar of those high up in the ranks of “socially acceptable” power. Rap slyly manipulates a dichotomy: at one point, the lyrics are funny and at the next moment, a medium for guerilla warfare against “the sophisticated technology of the dominant order” (Boyd). Boyd compares hip hop to a lyrical tower of Babel and its ominous effects on society. Hip hop seeks to tell the truth, regardless of the consequences to come. Hip hop seeks out what is real in a world which is can ignore for centuries truths that are supposedly “self-evident.” Rap desires to undercover “the real,” however elusive this reality may be. And in America, “real” includes long-lasting and ongoing social inequality.

**Part Three: Barack Obama's "Inaugural Address" as a Test Case  
of the Influence of the Call Response on African American Rhetoric**

**6. Barack Obama: "Inaugural Address" —January 20, 2009**

Now, I will analyze Barack Obama's "Inaugural Address" as a test case, noting if it shares the features of the voice of African American tradition, a rhetorical tradition that is most clearly experienced in the unique call response itself. As I have discussed, these traditional features include the interplay of repetition and heightening emotion provided especially through three techniques: using the "call response" directly, announcing jeremiad warnings and rallying cries, and using potent images to arouse emotions—the objective correlative. Traditionally, the repetition and emotional escalation of the call response seeks to invoke the power of the spirit to work through the community, inspiring them to be true to their guiding principles.

As his own background does, Obama, in his "Inaugural Address," combines aspects of the Traditional African World View and the American Dream as his personal answer to what is "the meaning of our liberty and our creed" (White House).

Even though Obama's election itself is a partial realization of the idealized future which his predecessors longed for—an America where all are equal, Obama admits in his speech that "everywhere we look, there is work to be done" and calls on his listeners to see this "patchwork" America as a strength and "not a weakness." He insists that "this new America we live in," is an America strengthened by all those who came before us, with their individual hopes and dreams, and varied backgrounds and lives.

Using both anaphora and the objective correlative, Obama recalls our ancestors and their sacrifices that made our nation what it is today as he uses the phrase “for us” repeatedly and dramatic imagery—similar to the repetition and heightening emotion of the call response:

For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops, and settled the West, endured the lash of the whip, and plowed the hard earth. For us, they fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg, Normandy and Khe Sahn.

In this passage, Obama organizes our shared history through chronologically listing what our ancestors did for our country. First, he refers the Puritans and their journey to escape the religious persecution which they had endured in their native land. As did Douglass, King, and Malcolm X, Obama cites the stain of slavery and “the lash of the whip.” At last, he names some of our nation’s conflicts: Revolutionary War, Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam War. The last role call is especially remarkable because it spans four wars in only a few words and allows us to recognize that our ancestors gave us, the future generations, the ultimate sacrifice in order to make our country better.

Although Obama does not directly use the call response in his speech, it is significant that he is applying one of the principles of Daniel and Smitherman’s Traditional African World View that gave rise to the call response: a view of reality that fuses apparent “opposites” as actually expressing an underlying unity, all emerging from the same spirit. As in the “Traditional African World View,” Obama experiences America’s differences only as facets of a united whole. With his own family a blend of many cultures, he calls for his listeners to bring about communal harmony by seeing past the differences; he calls for all to manifest the underlying and unifying “spirit of service.”

Just as the call response is designed to both call forth the spirit and witness to the spirit's presence—so Obama's speech functions as an invocation for the spirit of service.

Invoking of a "spirit of service" can call on and join together the communal nature of the Traditional African World View and the individuality valued by the American Dream. Both cultures would agree that only through individual contributions can community be achieved, and from this, create harmony—as we simultaneously engage individual and nation.

Another aspect of repetition is the use of "our" and "we." An example of this is "Our journey has never been ..." This passage conveys trials and tribulations which we, as a nation, collectively experience. Rather than using "I" or "your," these pronouns are useful in creating a shared identity. The speech calls for us, as Americans, to remember our past, and from these memories, we can become stronger as a unified nation, and we can better cope with the tribulations of our generation.

Obama urges that we Americans be recognized as a complete whole which has allowed us to keep both our individual unique attributes and our heritage as a patchwork quilt does. Ultimately, this freedom for self expression within the greater group allows for the greatest overall outcome to be achieved—just as a quilt can serve in so many wonderful ways.

He asks:

let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come; let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.



His speech is the embodiment of the American Dream for the next generation. It is a combination of traditional values and beliefs to create a dream of prosperity for all. No longer will there be a distinction between the nation and the citizens who reside in it: we are one in a nation that is a harmonious body where the “lines of tribes” that distinguish groups “shall soon dissolve” because of our willingness to “serve”—“For the world has changed, and we must change with it.”

I will conclude this explication of these six texts with a single passage in which Obama strikingly interweaves the themes that I have mentioned from these other works:

And because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

The new president refers to the Civil War, which is Douglass’s era and topic. Obama mentions segregation, recalling Martin Luther King, Jr.’s appeals as well as Douglass’s. When Obama wants to dissolve the “lines of tribe,” he is transcending Malcolm X’s concept of anti-integration and mutual distrust. And lastly, Obama issues a rallying cry to be strong—as both Grandmaster Flash and Public Enemy urge their audience to harness their inner strength and survive despite the conditions which they contend with daily.

Obama gives a “resolving prophesy”: “old hatreds shall someday pass” and America will usher “in a new era of peace.”

Obama draws on the concepts set forth by the Traditional African World View; however, he updates them to suit the upcoming era of change. In this era of transition, it is fitting for

traditional definitions to modulate into a call response appropriate for future generations of Americans. He does this by combining the American Dream with the Traditional African World View: the American Dream of success, peace and prosperity adds service and strengthening communal ties, ultimately achieving a unified nation “with liberty and justice for all.”

### **Conclusion**

In this work, I suggested that African Americans gave and received some of the mutual support they needed to persevere through the traditional patterns of communication promulgated by the Traditional African World View, which sprang from the African core belief that maintaining a fundamental balance in all of reality brings harmony and satisfaction. The rhetorical pattern that most clearly demonstrated this interaction was the unique call response. In church, with a preacher and the congregation; in a public venue, with an orator and the audience; or at a dance, with a singer and the chorus, the message resonates and takes on power as the caller and responder are equally valued—just as a heart beats through an interaction between rest and movement, in a measured rhythm of sound and silence.

This explication of six texts reveals an unbroken continuity of these rhetorical rhythmic patterns inspired by the repetition and emotion of call response, echoing as the voice of African American rhetoric through our history. Staying “in time” with the “Traditional African World View”—following the beat in their own call response—allowed African Americans to maintain their self and group actualization. The communal voice in these powerful spoken and sung messages will continue to inspire America to strive for the change needed until there will be true “freedom and justice for all”—and we indeed live in harmony in the Promised Land.

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