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Black Vernacular English and the Rhetoric of Jeremiah Wright

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By

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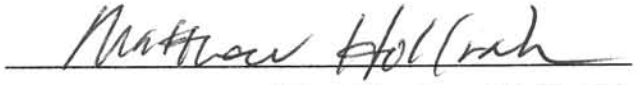

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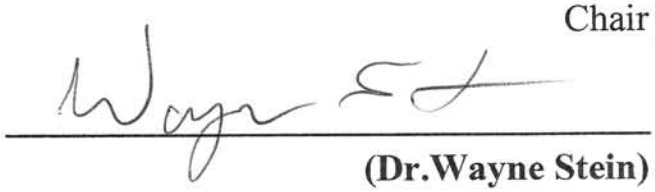

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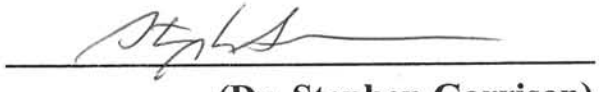

(Dr. Stephen Garrison)

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Black Vernacular English and the Rhetoric of Jeremiah Wright

The Black Church has played an integral role in the religious and social aspects that comprise the African American experience. The Black Church was a creation of Black people whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of an oppressive and racist society. For many slaves, the early Black Church was the sole source of identity and sense of community, and it remains a haven where African Americans can worship according to the African American religious tradition without being judged against the rigid status quo of hegemonic religious norms. The visage of the Black Church in America is a venue in which Black clergymen speak to a Black congregation about issues that affect Black Christians.

Because the primary linguistic vehicle employed in these sermons is Black Vernacular English (BVE) an analysis of the use of the vernacular is necessary. First, I will define BVE and other related terminology as these terms will be applied in this discussion. Next, I will discuss the rhetorical conventions which are prevalent in the Black Church in order to demonstrate how the African

American rhetorical tradition helps shape the cultural identity of many African Americans. Lastly, I will explain the central tenets of Black liberation theology as it informs Black Church sermons in order to provide theological underpinnings for the largely misconstrued comments within the sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, which he delivered to his congregation on April 13, 2003 and January 27, 2008. These sermons seamlessly connect elements of BVE, markedly Black rhetorical modes, and Black liberation theology. Wright's sermons represent the most recent example of the continued misunderstanding by mainstream America of the Black rhetorical tradition. Wright's comments were largely misapprehended by those outside of the Black Church who are unfamiliar with the African American rhetorical tradition. My contention and overarching purpose in this exposition is to delineate the ways in which Black vernacular permeates, saturates, and colors religious sermons, especially those informed by Black liberation theology as exemplified in the sermons of Jeremiah Wright.

More specifically, there are certain rhetorical moves which are pervasive within the African American rhetorical tradition such as call-response, repetition, and audience

participation among others. I employ these tactics in this exposition in order to simultaneously explain and demonstrate these maneuvers. Specifically I draw upon the use of repetition. I purposefully employ repetition in order to demonstrate the validity and effectiveness of this rhetorical move. However, rather than repeat the points I wish to emphasize verbatim, I vary my verbiage in an effort to show the applicability of this rhetorical method within the Black Church as well as an academic setting.

What Constitutes Black Vernacular?

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

The recent attention to Black English in the past decade has generated a growing body of research in the field of BVE. Consequently, academia and society at large are beginning to acknowledge BVE as a viable and valid

form of communication. Black scholar, linguist, and social critic Geneva Smitherman states that “an honest summary of our language history over the past 3 decades warrants the conclusion that progress has been made... We no longer have to fight for the legitimacy of African American speech” (154). While Black English is beginning to be considered permissible English, it is often regarded as substandard and often associated with African Americans of low socio-economic status. BVE is often marginalized to encompass only the way in which Blacks speak colloquially and regarded as only having its place in very informal settings. Black scholar and linguist J.L. Dillard contends in his book entitled Lexicon of Black English that BVE is often “spoken by younger, poorer Blacks as their only form of speech [but is often] retained as a special style even by some who have reached middle age and middle class” (ix). BVE does not serve a singular function within the African American community. Rather, it is spoken colloquially and, albeit less frequently, in more formal venues and settings.

Although not all African Americans employ Black Vernacular, it is undoubtedly an indelible part of the culture. There are many terms used to describe the oral communicative practices employed by many African Americans,

such as Black Vernacular English, Black language, African American Language, Ebonics, and Black English among others. There is widespread controversy among linguists as to whether the discrepancy between the language patterns characteristic of many African Americans constitutes a separate language from English, a dialect of English or a pidgin. However, this designation is a matter for a separate discussion, and for the purposes of this exposition I shall primarily employ the term Black Vernacular English. Furthermore, I shall use the ethnic nomenclature African American and Black interchangeably to describe people of African descent whose ancestors were brought to North America and the Caribbean for the purpose of slavery, as there is no consensus within the community as to what the ethnicity should be called.

African American culture has a rich linguistic heritage which widely employs Black Vernacular. Henry L. Mitchell, contributor to Language Communication and Rhetoric in Black America, states that Black Vernacular "is the lingua franca of the black [community] full of subtle shadings of sound and significance, cadence and color; it beguiles the hearer because it is familiar. It establishes rapport with him and influences him" (91). BVE

is the most widely endorsed dialect within the Black community and its use establishes a tacit solidarity between speaker and listener. Quite often African Americans are fully versed in the conventions of standard prescriptive English yet choose to speak to one another using BVE because of the natural rapport it fosters. Mitchell posits that

> There are several contrasting features that separate Black vernacular English from Standard English. One is the [typically] slower rate of delivery. Another is Black sentence structure, which on average is simpler than White middle class sentence structure. Still other differences range from highly technical and subtle uses down to the peculiar tonal inflections. (93)

Black vernacular has separate grammatical conventions and linguistic patterns from Standard English. These distinctions present an endless field of study in descriptive linguistics and culturally and ethnically specific rhetoric.

Origin of Black Vernacular

Several Creolists, including William Stewart, John Dillard, and John Rickford argue that BVE shares so many characteristics with Creole dialects spoken by Black people in much of the world that BVE is itself a Creole. It has been suggested that BVE has grammatical structures in common with West African languages and that BVE is best described as an African based language with English words. Black linguist Geneva Smitherman contends that:

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

While it is clear that there is a strong relationship between BVE and Southern American English, the unique characteristics of BVE cannot be fully explained as simply

a derivative of Southern English, and it is unclear exactly how the unique elements of BVE arose.

One theory is that BVE arose from one or more slave creoles that were derived from the trans-Atlantic slave trade due to the need for African captives to communicate among themselves for the purposes of survival. In Talkin' Black Talk, Black scholars and editors H. Samy Alim and John Baugh posit that

> A historically neglected dimension of the Black experience is the linguistic legacy and the related educational legacy of the slave trade. Sociolinguistic research has shown that the linguistic legacy of slave descendants of African origin differs from that of every other immigrant group in the United States. Despite this unique linguistic heritage or perhaps because of it, the law has never fully addressed the language issues faced by many black Americans. As involuntary immigrants, Black Americans differ from voluntary immigrants in that, in addition to suffering the cruel and obvious indignities of chattel slavery, they were abruptly cut off from their linguistic heritage. (2-3)

The distinctive circumstances by which Africans arrived in America and their consequent and abrupt departure from their original tongue has resulted in several theories regarding the origins of Black Vernacular English, but none prove conclusive. Another widely recognized theory is as follows:

> While the black population in the United States is far more diverse than is often noted, the languages of most Black slave descendants in the Americas do share two very important points. First, all the “New World” hybrid languages are the result of contact between African and European languages (Ibo and English for example.) (Alim 3)

Alim attempts to account for the similarities between AAVE and African languages as well as British English. He continues:

> All these languages, without exception have been viewed as lesser versions of their European counterparts, to put it mildly, or have suffered under the laws, practices, and ideologies of linguistic supremacy and White racism. It is the ideology and practice of linguistic supremacy –

> that is the false unsubstantiated notion that certain linguistic norms are inherently superior to the linguistic norms of other communities. (3)

Due to the reverberations of racism, BVE has widely been characterized as substandard, incorrect, and ungrammatical English. The use of the dialect is often deemed indicative of a lack of education. In schools and academia at large, Black vernacular is often regarded as an impediment to be remediated. African American scholar Charles E. Debose asserts

> Hegemonic ideas and values ... function to give legitimacy to the existing social order by providing justifications for inequalities in the distribution of social goods. In the realm of lifestyle and culture, the customs and practices of elite groups come to symbolize the benefits of membership in the elite and to serve as desirable attainments for persons striving toward elite status. When a particular language or way of speaking is associated with the elite, the ability to speak the language and speak it “correctly” may serve as a legitimating function. That is, the superior position of the dominant

> group is justified by its “proper” speech. Similarly, the subordinate position of marginalized groups is legitimated by the characterization of their language in such pejorative terms as *poor, slovenly, broken, bastardized,* or *corrupt.* (Debose 31)

Black Vernacular English reflects the ethnic, cultural, and national identities of the African Americans who speak it. Black vernacular is ubiquitous within Black culture and perhaps the area in which its pervasiveness has been the most underplayed is in the religious rhetorical tradition. While BVE has been rejected by mainstream White culture and largely by academia, it is fully embraced by the Black Church. Given the above stricture for the ways in which the term Black Vernacular will be used, I shall commence the discussion of the ways in which BVE permeates and shapes the rhetoric of the Black Church.

The Black Church

The term the *Black Church* seems to inherently carry with it an air of ambiguity. I will define the Black Church as an entity and as a terminology as used for the purposes of this discussion. Denotatively, Black activist and

leading Black liberation theologian, James Cone defines the Black Church as “that institution or group of Christian denominations ‘owned and operated’ by people of African descent” (241). But, its function in the Black community extends farther than the definition allows. James H. Cone asserts in Black Theology & Black Power that the Black Church was born in protest: ”Its reality stemmed from the eschatological recognition that freedom and equality are at the essence of humanity, and thus segregation and slavery are diametrically opposed to Christianity” (94). The Black Church was born out the slaves’ revelations regarding the incongruousness of slavery. The indoctrination of slaves with the precepts of Christianity proved to dismantle the validity of the institution of slavery in their minds. The more they learned about the benevolent nature of the deity they served the less they accepted the plight of slavery. Author and contributor to Understanding African American Rhetoric, Melbourne S. Cummings contends that “The black church is a sociological and theological construct encompassing the pluralism of Black Christians in the United States” (60). For the purposes of this discussion, the Black Church shall be constituted by any predominantly

Black congregation in the United States even if it is part of a predominantly White denomination.

The Christianization of Slavery

In order to discuss the vernacular and rhetorical devices peculiar to the African American rhetorical tradition as it appears in the Black Church, I will first give a brief history of the Black Church. After much discord among the White Christian Church regarding whether slaves should be imparted Christianity, missionaries began to evangelize African slaves in the early 1700's. However, the brand of Christianity preached to the slaves was one that justified slavery. It was decided that Paul and other New Testament writers handed down specific directives regarding master-slave relations. White missionaries tried to convince black slaves that life on earth was insignificant because "obedient servants of God could expect a reward in heaven after death" (Cone 121). This interpretation of Christianity attempted to divest the slaves of any hope for freedom in the present. As more and more Blacks began attending White Christian church services, restrictions in seating, communion services, and limits on participation in worship caused many Blacks to form their

own congregations and establish separate denominations. Thus, the organization of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was formed. This new autonomy marked what would become the beginning of the Black Church. Cone states that “relatively early the Church furnished the one and only organized field in which the slaves’ suppressed emotions could be released” (96). These early church services provided a venue for the slaves to fully express themselves through worship in ways that would have been deemed inappropriate by the White Church.

By the mid 1700’s, Black slaves were holding private church services. According to James Cone, the content of these early slave meetings was the beginnings of what is now referred to as Black liberation theology (96). God was interpreted by the slaves as a loving father who would eventually deliver them from bondage just as he had delivered Israel from oppression in Egypt. Jesus was considered both a savior and an elder brother in whom they found solidarity in suffering (Cone 96). Heaven had a dual implication for Black slaves. It referred to the future life after physical death, but it also came to represent a state of liberation in the present.

The Negro Spiritual as Lyrical Liberation Theology

Due to the risk involved in preaching liberation theology, slaves learned to sing “encoded” messages of liberation even in the master’s presence. Thus the Negro Spiritual was born. Black scholar and social critic Cornel West states that “the African American Spiritual--with its motifs of homelessness, namelessness, and hope against hope--is the artistic expression of this human outcry in the New World” (470). Sung in Black Vernacular English these songs simultaneously expressed the lamentations and hopeful sentiments of the oppressed while covertly spreading the message of freedom. Emmanuel McCall adds the parenthetical explanations to further explain the hidden meaning in the lyrics to this popular Spiritual:

> Swing low, sweet chariot (Underground railroad)
>
> Comin’ for to carry me home (North to freedom)
>
> Swing Low (Come close to where I am)
>
> Sweet Chariot
>
> Coming for to carry me Home
>
> I looked over Jordan (Ohio River-border between

North And South)

And what did I see,

Coming for to carry me home

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

coming after me.

Coming for to carry me home. (330)

One of the enduring qualities of spirituals is their ability to be misinterpreted by those unfamiliar with the hidden meaning in the lyrics. It is believed that had it not been for the dual nature of the lyrics that many of the conspiracies that led to freedom for countless slaves would have been foiled (Jackson 60). Spirituals were never static. Instead they reflected modifications by the entire community. Spirituals perpetuated messages of freedom and an end to injustice.

Spirituals have survived long after their need to conceal messages from the looming Master because they serve a much larger function. Melbourne S. Cummings contends that “spirituals have always been significant to African Americans as a means of discourse, shrouded with sometimes

hidden meanings and enveloped other times in blatant narratives”(66). These songs are an intrinsic part of the African American rhetorical tradition. They often reference Bible verses or tell stories of struggle or triumph. Cummings continues: “The indigenous sacred music of African Americans is tightly woven in [lyric] and performance with the lived experience of individuals” (57). Music, namely the spiritual, is an inextricable part of the Black Church and employs rhetorical elements which provide insights into the worldview and religious culture of the African American community.

These songs function as a rhetorical text, “a narrative imbedded in history, memory, and faith” (Cummings 58). Spirituals tell the stories of a vast expanse of emotions from despair to hope and strength. Cummings adds that the “Communal composition is at the heart of the songs’ source and inventiveness is the crux of the songs’ creative formulation” (66). A sort of collective improvisation is often at play. At any moment, a member of the congregation or choir might burst into spontaneous ad lib, which refers to the singing of a word or line of the song incrementally during the collective vocal pauses, and this is completely permissible and commonplace. These

spirituals often demonstrate an “antiphonal call-response relationship and a dynamic redundancy” (Cummings 58). This call-response system is pervasive within the African American Rhetorical tradition. Levine as quoted by Melbourne S. Cummings in *Jesus is a Rock: Spirituals as Lived Experience* asserts that:

> The structure of the spirituals (the traditional call-and-response pattern or lining out hymns) kept individuals in touch or in a kind of dialogue with the community. ... Slave music (spirituals) is testimonial to the fact that despite the inhumanity of the slavery system that did everything to destroy African American communality, it was unable to destroy it totally or to leave the slaves without defenses before their White masters. (60)

This system of call-response establishes cohesion between its participants. Differently than simply singing along with a hymn, call-response is interactive in a way that fosters a sense of teamwork and camaraderie among the singers. Often Spirituals will only consist of a few lyrics which are repeated many times. This redundancy is used as a rhetorical tool to emphasize the message within the lyrics.

(Call-response and redundancy are common rhetorical practices within the Black Church and will be examined further later in this exposition). Often times, the momentum of the song and the fervor with which the message of the lyrics is received will increase with each refrain. Slaves garnered solace and preserved a sense of hope for impending freedom from the lyrics and messages in the sacred spirituals they sang. After the abolition of slavery, slave theology that informed these Spirituals gave rise to Black activism from which Black liberation theology emerged as a formal discipline.

Emergence of a Formal "Black Theology"

Beginning with the 'Black power movement' in 1966, Black clergy in many denominations began to reassess the relationship between the Christian Church and the Black community. Black caucuses began to emerge in the Catholic, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. The central thrust of these new groups was to redefine the meaning and role of the Church and religion in the lives of Black people. Out of this reexamination has come what some call Black theology. For the first time in the history of Black

religious thought, Black clergymen and theologians began to redefine theology from the vantage point of African Americans. Black theologians began to re-read the Bible through the eyes of their slave grandparents and started to speak of God's solidarity with the oppressed of the earth (Hamilton 140). James Cone defines Black liberation theology as "a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ" (120). For the first time African Americans began to examine religion as it related to their own plight. This Black-centered theology was catalyzed by the emerging sense of pride brought about by the Black Power movement. Black scholar and author Gayraud Wilmore states that"Black philosophers and preachers disclose some of the seminal ideas of twentieth-century black theology: survival, self-help, elevation, chosenness, emigration, unity, reparations, liberation" (236).

James Cone is a pivotal thinker in the field of Black liberation theology. Cone's theology poses the question, "what does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless Black men whose existence is threatened daily by the

insidious tentacles of white power?”(32). In answering this pivotal question, Cone emphasizes that there is a close relationship between Black liberation theology and what has been termed “Black power.” Cone contends that Black power is a phrase that represents both Black freedom and Black self-determination “wherein Black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny” (6). Cone asserts that “Black liberation theology is the theological arm of black power, and black power is the political arm of Black theology” (209). The Black power movement of the 1960’s was largely catalyzed by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and caused a shift in the rhetoric of Black clergymen. This shift was marked by vehemence and indignation regarding the cause of equality that yet resounds in the Black Church. I find it necessary to clarify that I evoke Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. here only as a historical figure whose assassination sparked the indignation and anger in many African Americans, thus catalyzing the solidification of a formal Black theology. I am in no way insinuating that Dr. King was involved in the Black liberation movement as it is defined

in this exposition nor am I making a comparison between his rhetorical style and that of Reverend Wright.

Discontinuities between Black and White Christianity

Since Christianity was imparted to the slaves it has remained an integral part of the Black experience. Wilmore contends that “religion is and continues to be an essential thread in the fabric of Black culture despite Black sociological heterogeneity with respect to such secular factors as regional differences and socio-economic backgrounds” (220). Religion comprises a fundamental part of the African American experience and defies class distinction. Since the inception of slavery, religious faith has served as a coping mechanism that has helped African Americans deal with the mores of a racist society. Wilmore contends that:

> Blacks have used Christianity not so much as it was delivered to them by racist White churches, but as its truth was authenticated to them in the experience of suffering and struggle, to reinforce the acculturated religious orientation and to produce an indigenous faith that

emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare. (4)

African slaves adopted the Christian ideals imparted by European missionaries but adapted these ideals to support their cause for freedom and social equity. One of the reasons that slaves seceded from the White Christian Church is that there were some intrinsic differences in the ways that they wished to express themselves in worship. While Black Christians accepted the major theological tenets of Christianity, they implemented some substantive changes due to preexisting customs and cultural differences. From its inception, the Black church has exhibited a marked style of devotion and theology. One way in which the Black Church sets itself apart is through the congregations' involvement in the sermon through the pervasive call/response system, the somewhat colloquial means by which the pastor often communicates with his congregation, and the inclusion of BVE in the sermon.

Black Vernacular in the Black Sermon

In religious circles throughout history, Standard English (or Latin in Catholicism) has been deemed the only acceptable means by which to preach the gospel in public.

With the rise of the Black Church, however, this standard has been challenged. The vast majority of black churches have found it difficult to relate to Black clergymen speaking proper prescriptive English. When a substantial number of Black culture churches have been faced with the choice between a pastor who could effectively communicate with them or a man who was merely educated, they have chosen communicative proficiency over education. Author, Henry L. Mitchell, posits that“to lose one’s language is to lose one’s identity. To refuse to learn and use the peoples’ language is an affront to the people one presumes to serve” (88).

However, trained clergymen who can code-switch between BVE and prescriptive English are highly effective and sought after. Many Black clergymen have had to be “White culture proficient” in order to satisfy college and seminary requirements, but when this education causes these clergymen to lose touch with their Black congregation the congregation will likely begin to drift (Mitchell). The Black preacher “must be able to reach the souls of Black folk with soul language, putting them at ease and gaining maximum access by avoiding all the linguistic signals of social distance from his

congregation” (Mitchell 90). One of the chief skills of the Black preacher is to connect with and influence his congregation without overtly stating that he has deliberately chosen the language most appropriate for the task. The preacher’s use of BVE establishes his connection with Black culture and an explicit acknowledgment of this association would call his authenticity into question. This mix of charisma and eloquence that is the Black preacher is embodied in the cadence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. While he cannot be called a formal participant in the Black theology movement, his poignant speeches roused the consciousness of Black Americans to passionate commitment to liberation. Mitchell contends that “Dr. King was a brilliant fusion of markedly Black speech patterns and modes of delivery and prescriptive English” (88).

The Black preacher often will employ varying degrees of Black Vernacular in a sermon. It is not uncommon for a Black preacher to paraphrase a scripture using Black vernacular. Mitchell states “for instance a Black preacher might render God’s speech to Peter in the text against racism (Acts 10 14-15): Looka here, Peter, Don’t you be callin’ *nothin’* I made common or dirty!” (92). This presents the message in a familiar and relatable manner

and validates Black identity by putting the vernacular of the people into the mouth of God. Mitchell continues: “No man can truly identify with a god who only speaks the language of his oppressor” (92). I will delve more into depth regarding the specific communicative and rhetorical functions of employing BVE from the pulpit later in this examination at which time I will do a close reading of a sermon that employs the vernacular.

Black Religious Terminology and Paralinguistics

It is undeniable that there are often marked differences between the worship practices and modes of delivery of sermons in Black churches and that of their White counterparts. In order to fully discuss the discrepancies between the ways in which Blacks and Whites carry out the practices of Christianity, it is first important to note the marked cultural difference that often show up in African American communicative practices. Theresa Redd, contributor to Delivering College Composition, asserts that “African Americans have inherited a rich rhetorical tradition, rooted in the cultures of Africa and cultivated in the streets and churches of Black America” (79). African Americans often employ a linguistic and

rhetorical repertoire peculiar to the Black community. Arthur K. Spears, contributor to Talkin' Black Talk: Language, Education and Social Change states that "*Black style, the Black Aesthetic, Black performativity* are three terms among others that have been used to capture the most significant interconnected themes throughout African American culture" (101). Spears defines performativity as the "stylistic dramatization of the self that individuals infuse into their behaviors" (104). This behavioral and semantic license that characterizes the communicative behaviors of many African Americans often emerges in religious sermons. Black preachers often vary intonation, volume, and pitch within sermons in order to create emphasis, fully express themselves, and convey the message of the gospel with fervor. J. L. Dillard contends that:

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

Anthropologist Alan Lomax observed a Black slave sermon and was quoted as saying, “The phrases come like rifle shots. The voice rasps the nerves like a file. Gasping intake of breath after each line. People shouting, women screaming. Pandemonium” (qtd. in Dillard 48). Lomax obviously observes the slave church service with an unsympathetic, biased interpretation, but his adverse reaction to the dissimilarities between the worship style of the Blacks he observed and the White churches considered Orthodox in that day bears testament to the manifest differences between the two Churches. Dillard describes a typical Black Church service as follows:

> The sermon starts, typically with a bible [sic] reading and a discourse on the meaning of the selected verse. As the preacher proceeds the congregation becomes more and more involved they *bear him up* by calling antiphonally “Das right,” “Sho Nuff,” “Sweet Jesus!,” and “Preacher,” or simply echo part of his words all neatly in his off beats. (Dillard 54)

The members of the congregation who shout “Amen” and fervently encourage the preacher are referred to as the Amen Corner. As the tension builds and the service reaches

its rhetorical climax, the responses from the congregation get louder and more fervent, but they never lose the rhythm and timing so peculiar to Black services (Dillard 55). This phenomenon of audience participation is counter-intuitively undisruptive. The intermittent comments of the congregation rarely overlap or interrupt the preacher's oration. Typically, the preacher does not pause for or outwardly acknowledge these verbal displays of approval. The Black preacher employs a natural cadence and the Amen Corner seemingly instinctively knows when to deploy their words of encouragement.

Another paralinguistic tool that Black preachers often employ is intonation. Dillard adds that "the extreme feature, a vocal rasp that makes an outsider wonder how such a man can survive one sermon, much less preach again, is sometimes called gravely voice" (Dillard 55). This low raspy tone is used to create emphasis and highlight a point in the sermon. This intention is mutually understood by the audience and this gravely voice often garners a positive reaction from the congregation. The preacher does not overuse this intonation and often waits until the climax of the sermon to employ it.

The livelier the sermon and congregation grow the more likely the preacher is to begin to solely employ BVE. Additionally, Black preachers exercise rhetorical license and begin to intermingle several rhetorical tools. J. L. Dillard describes the Black sermon as follows:

> The preacher proceeds, more or less in the language of the Bible and of spirituals, but adding his own individual touches. He easily slips into the words of a familiar song-or perhaps he is sometimes singing. There is, at this point so much excitement that it is almost impossible to tell. (55)

This individual flair and stylistic prowess is highly valued within the Black Church and the Black Community at large.

Communicative Consciousness in the Black Religious Rhetorical Tradition as Evinced in the Sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright

Rhetorical dexterity garners respect and esteem within the Black Church. However, rhetorical skill is not measured

necessarily by how well one utilizes prescriptive English grammar conventions, but rather how rousing and relatable the verbiage and style used in the sermon is. H. Samy Alim contends that “Black folks highly value verbal skills expressed orally. Black culture abounds with verbal rituals and rhetorical devices through which this oral linguistic competence can be expressed” (81). This affinity for linguistic proficiency is apparent throughout the African American rhetorical tradition particularly in Black sermons:

> Black speakers are greatly flamboyant, flashy, and exaggerative; Black [speeches] are highly stylized, dramatic and spectacular. But black communicative performance is a two way street, and so the audience becomes both observers and participants in the speech event. With its responses, the listeners can influence the direction of a given rap and at the same time acknowledge (or withhold) their approval depending on the linguistic skill of the speaker. No preacher can succeed if he’s not a good talker. (Alim 81)

Some of the most interesting and distinctive features of BVE are to be uncovered in the kinds of expressions

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

The lack of public exposure to and familiarity with the culture of the Black Church was recently evinced by the controversy involving Reverend Jeremiah Wright. I evoke Wright only as a recent incarnation of the misunderstanding on the part of mainstream America of the use of BVE and the African American rhetorical tradition. Reverend Wright is best known for shouting “God Damn America” from his pulpit in 2003. His comments were unearthed in 2008 in light of Barack Obama, a long-time member of Wright’s congregation, acquiring the Democratic presidential nomination.[1] The doctrine expressed in Reverend Wright’s comments during his sermon falls within the confines of Black liberation

theology. Reverend Wright's rhetorical style lends itself seamlessly to this discussion of how BVE and rhetorical tools peculiar to the Black church color religious sermons in the Black Church. I will explicate portions of two of Reverend Wright's sermons in order to illustrate the ways in which BVE is used along with rhetorical tools specific to the African American rhetorical tradition to deliver the tenets of Black liberation theology. One of the sermons I will examine is the infamous sermon in which Reverend Wright stated that the events of 9-11 were a result of the "United States chickens coming home to roost" (a comment originally made by Malcolm X following the Kennedy assassination)[2] and another more recent of Wright's sermons that is no less indicative of the reverberations of Black liberation theology. I shall situate the sermons in three ways. First, I will discuss the rhetorical strategies he employs which are peculiar to the Black Church sermon and the Black preacher. Secondly, I will situate the tenets of Black liberation theology that fuel his contentions in order to show that the public has largely misconstrued his contentions. Lastly, I will illuminate the ways in which BVE shapes and contextualizes his sermons.

Reverend Wright presides over the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois. The sermon that I will explicate first was delivered to his congregation on January 27, 2008. Reverend Wright's rhetorical style is most effective and pungent when heard audibly because African American culture is primarily an oral culture and many of the nuances and rhetorical tools used in Black discourse do not seamlessly translate into a written medium. The sound bytes of his controversial comments have been viewed on YouTube millions of times. Without the proper context and collective understanding of Black liberation theology and the culture of the Black Church, Wright's comments have been widely misconstrued. Without understanding the concept of behavioral and rhetorical license that is ever-present in the Black Church, some of the rhetorical tools that Wright employs can seem somewhat anomalous. One rhetorical maneuver that Wright demonstrates throughout his message is redundancy, or the use of a refrain. The scriptural foundation for his sermon comes from John chapter 7, and leading up to reading the passage from John, Reverend Wright repeats the same phrase in order to emphasize the importance of what he is about to read from that passage. He proceeds as follows:

> Mathew tells the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil. But the story in John 7 is more powerful than that. Mark tells the story of Jesus being in the synagogue and a man coming to worship with a withered hand –but the story in John 7 is more powerful than that. Luke tells the story of Jesus going to Jericho and as he passed a blind man who heard the crowd with Jesus passing and asked what was happening and they told him “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by” so he shouted “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. ... But the story in John 7 is even more powerful than that. (Wright)

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

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

Again, Wright demonstrates the use of a refrain and repetition. In this passage, however, he varies his intonation of the italicized words in order to create emphasis and create a lyrical nuance to his words. This use of parallel sentence structure and repetition add a colorful element to the sermon and is typically seen as a display of rhetorical design. These rhetorical maneuvers garner respect from the congregation and fortify the credibility and rhetorical reputation of the speaker.

Another rhetorical element that Wright utilizes which is intrinsic to the African American rhetorical tradition is audience participation. Apart from the aforementioned call-response system and the intermittent verbal encouragement by the Amen Corner, preachers will often engage in a direct dialogue with the congregation. The first example of solicited audience participation comes relatively early in Wright’s sermon:

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

While these seem like rhetorical questions, in the sense that they do not warrant a response, these questions are posed with the intent to and succeed at garnering a response from the audience. Yeses and Amens resound. The dynamic between the Black preacher and Black Congregation more closely resembles a conversation than a typical speaker/listener relationship which is predominant in non-Black churches. The preacher asks his congregation a question collectively so that the question and answer will

resonate with them individually. He does this to ensure that the congregation knows that the sermon is applicable to their daily lives because the relatablilty of the sermon is a meritorious quality within the Black Church.

Similarly, Wright employs rhetorical moves that foster interactions among the congregation:

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

This sentiment behind the emphasis on interaction between Church members dates back to the early days of the Black Church in which the Church was a beacon of unity in a society that separated and divided the Black family through the institution of slavery. This rhetorical maneuver is a form of tacit pathos through which the preacher subtly

evokes the congregation's emotions. This verbal interaction as facilitated by the pastor instills a sense of commonality and cohesion among the congregation perpetuating the purpose of the Black Church as a spiritual haven for Black people. Additionally, repeating a phrase makes it more memorable and the Black preacher is typically aware of that.

Another way in which Wright employs the pervasive call-response system in his sermons is by pausing to let the congregation finish his thought. He states that:

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

This strategic pause is a rhetorical tactic used to engage the audience. It is a way for the pastor to ensure that the congregation has been listening closely and that he has not lost their attention. Additionally, this fill-in-the blank rhetorical move creates emphasis.

It is apparent through these excerpts that Wright, like many other preachers within the Black Church, assumes an authoritative voice throughout his sermon. Much of the

message is presented as an admonishment to the congregation and at times assumes a scolding tone. Additionally, Wright employs a somewhat disjointed and discontinuous rhetorical pattern. Aretha Ball, author of “Cultural Preference and the expository writing of African American Adolescents” contends that “these patterns include ‘circumlocution’ [which is] a series of implicitly associated topics with shifts that are lexically marked only by the use of *and*” (Ball 509). There are many rhetorical moves that are typically employed exclusively by the Black Preacher as is evident in the previous excerpts from one of Wright’s less controversial sermons. Next, I will shift the focus to the theological underpinnings that catalyzed Wright’s comments from his infamous and widely contested sermons from 2001 and 2003.

On the Sunday following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Reverend Wright preached a sermon undergirded by what he calls the “brutally honest” last verse of Psalm 137, which he said “spotlighted the insanity and cycle of violence” throughout history (Wright). The transcript of this sermon was delivered to the media at the height of the presidential campaign in order to damage democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama’s

credibility for consorting with a man who would make such anti-American remarks. What the public failed to realize is that Wright was preaching from a theological doctrine that dates back to anti-slavery rhetoric of the nineteenth century and none of what he was saying was new. Additionally, the media did not mention the rhetorical and doctrinal tradition that undergirds Wright's sermon and thus broadcasted his remarks without contextualizing them. The sound byte that resounded on YouTube and newscasts was as follows:

> We've bombed Hiroshima, We've bombed Nagasaki, we've nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon and we never batted an eye. We have supported state terrorism against the Palestine's and the Black South Africans, and now we are indignant. Because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back into our front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost. (Wright)

Largely taken out of context, Wright's comments inflamed many Americans and were seen as anti-American and unsympathetic to the tragedies of September 11. While his words seem particularly pungent to those who are unfamiliar

with the doctrines and style delivery of Black liberation theology, Wright's sermon excerpt closely follows the theological tradition that precedes him by more than a century. Black liberation theology follows a specific framework: "Taking a biblical text, he analyzes the history and language, highlights the personal pain likely shared by people in the pews, calls out similar injustices in today's society and emphasizes that God always provides" (Tribune). This blurb, however, does not convey the entire context of the sermon and was used to vilify Wright with no regard for the theological suppositions that informed his remarks.

Jeremiah Wright is a theological protégé of James Cone, one of the most influential Black liberation theologians of his generation. In order to situate and frame Wright's comments it is necessary to examine Cone's theology. Wright, like Cone seems to equate American power with White power and sees Christianity from a markedly ethnocentric perspective. In his book Liberation: a Black Theology of Liberation, Cone makes a statement that almost directly mirrors Wright's comments about 9-11. Cone states:

> American White theology has not been involved in the struggle for black liberation; it has basically been a theology of the White oppressor,

> giving religious sanction to the genocide of Indians and the slavery of black people. From the very beginning to the present day, American White theological thought has been “patriotic” either by defining the theological task independently of black suffering or defining Christianity as compatible with White racism. (22)

The first line of the previous quote regarding the lack of involvement of Whites in the struggle for Black liberation is extreme and historically inaccurate, but it illustrates the angry fervor that often characterizes the sentiments within Black liberation theology. Here Cone, like Wright, indicts the United States on the wrongs it has committed against its non-white citizens. Cone’s anti-White anti-nationalist sentiments are common tenets within Black liberation theology. While Cone and Wright employ a particularly forthright and abrasive tone, their sentiments echo those that have resounded for centuries within the African American rhetorical tradition dating back to activists such as Marcus Garvey and Howard Thurman. Scholar Cornel West contends that:

> Liberation theologies are the principals of Christian prophetic thought and action in our

> contemporary age. They present the ways of life and struggles of Christians around the world who have convinced remnants of the church to open its eyes to human misery and oppose socio-economic systems and political structures that perpetuate such misery. (393)

James H. Cone wrote Liberation in 1970 just after the height of what he calls the Black revolution, better known as the Black Power Movement. This may explain the fervor and vehemence with which he writes. Modernity has largely subdued the style of delivery of Black Liberation theological texts, which may partly explain the jarring effect that Wright's statements had on those who are unfamiliar with the theology. In order to fully understand Wright's statements, it is necessary to explain the axiology of Christianity as guided by Black liberation theology. Theologian Richard Hogue states that "in Assessing James Cone's theology it is critical to recognize that he sees Black experience as a fundamental starting point for ascertaining theological truth"(7). One of the central tenants that inform Black liberation theology is the interpretation of the gospel as a "theology arising from an identification with the oppressed Black community

and seeks to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of the liberation of that community" (Cone 25). Black liberation theology is in a sense a personalization and customization of Christianity by and for African Americans. The plight of Black people is seen as an integral part of the gospel and what makes religion applicable to African Americans.

Black liberation theology purports the view of a monotheistic deity as a god who is concerned with the cause of liberation and is directly and actively involved in the emancipation of the oppressed. Many Black liberation theologians contend that God's deliverance of the Israelites from the oppression of the Egyptians bears testament to God's concern for the disenfranchised and the fact that he detests societies' "lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in society" (Cone 19). Cone and other Black liberation theologians depict God as actively advocating and working on behalf of Blacks and other disenfranchised groups.

Black liberation theology is a Christian theology in that Jesus Christ as deity is at the crux of the theology. Cone contends that Jesus Christ is "God himself coming into the very depths of human existence for the sole purpose of

striking off the chains of slavery, thereby freeing man from ungodly principalities and powers that hinder his relationship with God" (Cone 35). This idea of Jesus as liberator is central to the foundational purpose and function of Black liberation theology as a doctrine of hope. The idea of Jesus Christ as an immanent redeemer and advocate for the cause of freedom has been a source of encouragement and has served a legitimating function for Blacks in the face of injustice, especially when those injustices were enacted, perpetuated, and defended by the law of the land. Black liberation theology promotes the immediacy of hope or the idea that divine rescue is always on the horizon. Paradoxically, the Black Church endorses the idea of the New Testament Jesus as redeemer, but simultaneously purports the notion of a vengeful Old Testament God who punishes wrongdoers in this life (rather than the afterlife) in a *you reap what you sow* ideology. This explains Wright's comments regarding "America's chickens coming home to roost." This belief regarding Jesus as redeemer and God as avenger is irreconcilable with the predominant doctrine of Eurocentric Christianity that promotes the idea of redemption and judgment as solely in the afterlife.

Cone contends that “if eschatology means that one believes that God is totally uninvolved in the suffering of man because he is preparing them for another world, then black theology is not eschatological. Black theology has hope for this life” (Cone 123). Without this perception of God’s concern with the present an eschatological theology may well have fostered a religious nihilism in many African Americans. Thus the belief that Jesus is concerned with freedom in life on earth serves a pragmatic survival function.[3]

Black liberation theology is a rendering of Christianity as it concerns the plight of people of African descent in America. The tradition is marked by a hostile rejection of the mores of hegemonic racist society and is characterized by a vehement denouncement of all things and people who are seen as part of the racist hegemonic establishment. This is not an innately racist sentiment but one that can and often does foster ethnocentrism.

Having explicated the central principles of Black liberation theology, I will now move to an examination of Wright’s most controversial comment. Perhaps the most shocking of all of Wright’s remarks comes from his sermon delivered to his congregation in July of 2003 in which he

declares “The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants to sing ‘God Bless America’? No, no, no, not God Bless America,’ ‘God Damn America’” (Wright). In order to discuss this comment I find it necessary to contextualize it. Examining the full content of Wright’s sermon yields a far more complex message than the sound byte that was broadcast by the media, but for the sake of brevity I will only quote the few sentences directly before and directly after his “God Damn America” remark:

> The United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian decent fairly, she failed. She put them on reservations. When it came to treating her citizens of Japanese decent fairly, she failed. She put them in internment prison camps. When it came to treating her citizens of African decent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains. The government put them on slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the

> equal protection of the law, kept them out of the racist bastions of higher education and locked them into positions of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them drugs builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strikes law and then wants to sing “God Bless America” No, no ,no, not “God Bless America,” “God Damn America.” That’s in the Bible for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating its citizens as less than human, God damn America as long as she tries to act like she is God and she is supreme. The United States government has failed its citizens of African descent. (Wright)

In line with the theoretical structure typical of Black liberation theology, Wright recounts the injustices and indignities that have been inflicted on African Americans in the United States and holds the American government accountable for these iniquities. When read in context, Wright’s comments sound less like a malicious denouncement of all things American and more like the angry reverberations of the pain caused by the injustices that have befallen an entire ethnicity of people.

A sympathetic reading of Wright's sermon lends it more readily to the sentiment of righteous indignation rather that militancy and hatred. Few will argue with the validity and factualness of most of his comments regarding the troubled history of race relations in this country, but his vilification of America is troubling to most people's nationalist sensibilities. It is easier to be tolerant of such controversial comments with an understanding of the tenets and theological foundations of Black liberation theology. Wright's comments become less offensive when examined through the lens of an understanding of the precepts of Black liberation theology, and while they might still be disconcerting to many, his remarks are theologically justified when situated in this larger religious and cultural framework. Informed by the doctrinal and rhetorical tradition of his predecessors, Wright delivered a sermon replete with all of the rhetorical and theological ideals relayed in Black vernacular that have defined generations of activism, but have stayed within the confines of the Black community and the Black Church until it was introduced to the mainstream by the media with no theological preface and with the intent to incite controversy.

Wright’s congregation is primarily comprised of African Americans and one of the ways he relates to his audience is through the use of BVE. I will now return the focus of this exposition back to the first of Wright’s sermons that I explicated through lens of the rhetorical maneuvers he employs. Now, I will examine that same sermon emphasizing his mode of delivery using BVE as a communicative vehicle to convey the tenets of Black liberation theology. While BVE is inherently linguistically heterogeneous, even with its regional variations, BVE is markedly and unmistakably *Black*, meaning that when a speaker of BVE hears another speaker employ the vernacular, there is an instant recognition of that person’s ethnicity and/or culture and thus the vernacular forges an instant connection and an unspoken solidarity between speakers. The use of BVE displays the cultural integrity that is crucial to the Black identity (Mitchell 88). The use of BVE is an essential part of the cultural identity of many African Americans. Coupled with the emphasis on adept verbal communication skills within the Black community, the use of Black vernacular in public forums such as religious sermons is a way for Black speakers and preachers to communicate in a familiar, comfortable, and often automatic vernacular

with his congregation which is a part of his speech community. Henry L. Mitchell asserts that:

> Within a speech community it is easiest to communicate by using the language of that group. The subtle meanings and shades of meaning, the particular pronunciation and accent, the intonation and total signal of any given group are altogether “proper” to that group. In fact, no language is improper among its own users, since it is most capable of the task for which all language exists: communication. (88)

A preacher’s use of BVE within a sermon is viewed as completely normative, and indeed the absence of BVE would be conspicuous. Black preachers use BVE in order to make the sermon more relatable for a predominantly Black congregation. Reverend Wright’s sermon provides an exemplary model for the ways in which BVE enlivens the African American religious sermon. He seamlessly intersperses BVE into his sermon in an effort to connect with his audience. In this transcribed sermon Wright paraphrases the Bible in order to make the message more approachable to his congregation. He preaches:

> Verse 14 says that right around the middle of the festival, Jesus went into the temple and began to teach. Here's the picture I want you to get in your mind; Jesus talking, Jesus teaching in the temple. Verse 25. Some of the people said: "isn't this the man that some of the authorities are trying to kill? And here he is in the temple speaking openly? Ain't nobody saying nothing to nobody/ you think the authorities know that he is really the messiah?"

Here Reverend Wright translates the language of the speakers in the Bible into BVE. In doing so he loses no credibility with his congregation because he informs them of which verse he is paraphrasing before he does so. This allows the audience to follow along while simultaneously hearing him translate the words of the Bible into a more germane and familiar vernacular. Henry L. Mitchell contends that "the lesson of the message is better learned because the scene is experienced in the worship rather than simply heard in theory. The experience factor is greatly reduced when the message is offered in a foreign tongue". The portion of the scripture that is the most obvious BVE paraphrase is the line "Ain't nobody saying nothing to

nobody.” The use of a double negative is commonplace within Black Vernacular and does not warrant remediation as it does in standard prescriptive English. Most users of BVE recognize that the vernacular is considered incorrect by prescriptive English standards, and recognize the preacher’s motives of relatabilty in incorporating Black vernacular into his sermon. Usually the limited use of BVE is viewed favorably by a Black congregation as an attempt to assert and preserve his *blackness* while employing flawless grammar and usage elsewhere in the sermon. Henry L. Mitchell asserts the importance for a Black preacher to exhibit a sort of bilingual competency. He states that the Black preacher “must assure his congregation that he doesn’t talk flat all the time, so that they will have confidence that he can adequately represent their interests outside of the [Black community]” (91). By this he means that it is important for Black preachers to be proficient in Standard English as well as be able to code-switch seamlessly between it and Black Vernacular English in order to best serve the dual needs of his congregation.

Another facet of BVE encompasses slang. While slang is used sparingly within Black Church sermons, it serves an inextricable function within the African American

rhetorical tradition. Wright peppers these colloquialisms into his sermon as he continues:

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

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

> He must be able to reach the souls of Black folk with soul Language, putting them at ease and gaining maximum access by avoiding all the linguistic signals of social distance from his congregation. Yet he must also be able to

> reinforce and keep alive the language learnings of the young people in his congregation which link them to the larger community. (91)

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

> saying maybe this is the one, maybe God is getting ready to bust a move, maybe some real change is about to happen and not just cosmetic changes, where the name changes and the game is still the same. Look at verse 32. Switch over to those who hatin' on Jesus, verse 32; The

> Pharisees heard the crowd hoping and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent the temple police to arrest him and Jesus kept on talking. Say, Po-po "Here come the po-po." (Wright)

Wright continues to assert his connection with the younger members of his congregation with terms like Po-po. Po-po is a slang term that refers to a police officer. Additionally he states that God is about to "bust a move," which simply means make a move, and ascribes slang to the actions of God. The use of slang is yet another way that the pastor establishes ethos with his congregation. This level of credibility of the speaker is an integral part of the African American rhetorical tradition. The use of inherently *Black* language and employing modes of rhetorical delivery peculiar to African American culture allow the Black preacher to maximize his influence on and credibility with his congregation. Typically, and not surprisingly, sermons informed by Black liberation theology are marked by these inherently *Black* modes of delivery. BVE along with rhetorical and paralinguistic modes of expression and delivery which are valued so highly in the African American culture are useful to imparting the principles and tenets

of Black liberation theology which has ethnic awareness at its crux.

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

> Each person draws on two sources of linguistic supply: the current usage that corresponds to his particular level of literacy as well as private thesaurus. The latter is inextricably part of his subconscious, of his memories so far as they can be verbalized, and of his regular identity. Each communication act has a private residue the ‘personal lexicon’ in all of us inevitably qualifies the definitions, connotations, and denotations in public discourse. Even the concept of standard usage is a fiction, as statistical average. The language of a community, however uniform its social contour is an inexhaustibly multiple aggregate of finally irreducible

> meanings. This is what I call the notion of privacy in language. (93)

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

There are many rhetorical devices peculiar to the sermons within the Black Church. The call-response system, lyrical rhetoric as found in spirituals, and paralinguistic tools such as voice tone and pitch serve specific rhetorical functions that warrant further study and explication in the field of rhetoric. Additionally, the pathos used to preach the tenets of Black liberation

theology has been largely overlooked within the field of rhetoric.

The aim of the field of rhetoric is to examine the maneuverability of language as a means by which to influence and persuade an audience. The African American rhetorical tradition is replete with rhetorical tactics that are seldom if ever found outside of the African American community and thus must be examined more fully as it undoubtedly enriches the field of rhetoric. African American rhetorical practices, paralinguistics, and modes of delivery are inextricable from any exhaustive discussion of the flexibility and function of language within the field of rhetoric. Many of the rhetorical devices that enliven the African American rhetorical tradition are found within the sermons of the Black Church in which call-response, Spirituals, and tonal and pitch variations shape the tradition. The lack of attention to this facet of rhetoric has become recently evident through the predominant misinterpretation of the style and content of Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermons. His modes of delivery, rhetorical devices, and use of BVE are pervasive within the Black Church and further study of these elements will greatly enrich the field of rhetoric. Additionally, the

tenets of Black liberation theology and its appeals to pathos are also rhetorically estimable and worthy of further examination.

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Endnotes

1. Barack Obama was the first African American presumptive nominee for the Democratic Party in February 2008. Shortly thereafter excerpts from Wright’s sermons surfaced in order to besmirch Obama’s reputation and credibility. Wrights comments were largely pegged as racist, anti-American and inflammatory.

2. Malcolm X delivered his speech entitled “God's Judgment of White America” on December 4, 1963. It is important to note that this speech was delivered before Malcolm left the Nation of Islam, so his views in this speech do not reflect those he held near the end of his life. This speech is sometimes called "The Chickens Come Home to Roost," because of an answer Malcolm X gave in response to a question following the speech. The question concerned the late President John Kennedy. It was Malcolm X's answer, that the Presidents death was a case of "chickens coming home to roost" -- that the violence that Kennedy had failed to stop had come back to him; this resulted in the Elijah Muhammad silencing him. Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam a short time later(Karim).

Additionally, Ward Churchill, University of Colorado professor, stated during an interview with the *Boulder Weekly*, Feb. 10 2005 “On the morning of September 11, 2001, a few more chickens – along with some half-million dead Iraqi children – came home to roost in a very big way at the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center. Well, actually, a few of them seem to have nestled in at the Pentagon as well” (Churchill).

3. In an interview with Bill Moyers on April 25, 2008 Reverend Wright made the following comments that further illustrate his solidarity with the James Cone regarding the eschatological nature of Christianity in the Black Church.

> **Bill Moyers:** What does the church service on Sunday morning mean in general to the black community?
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> **Reverend Wright:** It means many things. I think one of the things the church service means is hope. That tells me that there is hope in this life, almost like Psalm 27 when David said, "I would have fainted unless I lived to see the

goodness of the right in this life. "Don't tell me about heaven. What about in this life-- that there is a better way, that this is not in vain, that it is not Edward Albee or Camus' absurd, the theater of the absurd. It is not Shakespeare full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. That life has meaning and that God is still in control, and that God can, and God will, some people of goodwill working hard do something about the situation. We can change. We can do better. We can change policy. We can look back and say, "Well, 40 years ago when King was alive, we did not have right before his death, a civil rights act. We did not have a voting rights act." So, change is possible. But I'm getting my head whipped. The average member in the black church five days a week, “tell me that this is not all there is to this." So, they come looking for hope. And as we've tried to do, move a hurt. People who are marginalized, marginalized in the educational system, marginalized in the socioeconomic system -- to move them from hurt to

healing, that there is really is a balm in Gilead. (Wright)