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Spring/Summer 2013,NO.1,Volume 17

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责任编辑:陈克坚
责任校对:闫玉佩
封面设计:原谋设计工作室
责任印制:王　炜

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

比较文学：东方与西方. 17：英文 / 曹顺庆，王晓路主编. —成都：四川大学出版社，2013.1
ISBN 978-7-5614-6482-3

Ⅰ.①比… Ⅱ.①曹… ②王… Ⅲ.①比较文学-文集-英文 Ⅳ.①I0-03

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字（2012）第 318086 号

书名　**比较文学:东方与西方(17)**

主　　编　曹顺庆
出　　版　四川大学出版社
地　　址　成都市一环路南一段 24 号 (610065)
发　　行　四川大学出版社
书　　号　ISBN 978-7-5614-6482-3
印　　刷　四川锦祝印务有限公司
成品尺寸　170 mm×240 mm
印　　张　11.75
字　　数　227 千字
版　　次　2013 年 1 月第 1 版
印　　次　2013 年 1 月第 1 次印刷
定　　价　68.00 元

◆读者邮购本书,请与本社发行科联系。电 话:85408408/85401670/85408023　邮政编码:610065
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◆网址:http://www.scup.cn

Comparative Literature: East & West

University, Holland, has passed away. We express our heartfelt grief on the death of Prof Douwe Fokkema.)

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Comparative Literature: East & West
Autumn/Winter 2012, Number 2, Volume 17.

Contents

Appreciating African American Rhetoric Through the Lens of Afrocentricity

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中文摘要：本文透过非洲中心主义这个视角来讨论美国黑人话语的丰富性。这种美国黑人话语主要体现在诺莫人(*Nommo*)这个首要概念上，以及该概念的对于理解非洲中心世界观极其关键的各种特质上。本文将从理论上考察非洲中心主义的修辞，并阐释非洲中心主义的理论/哲学层面以及非洲中心主义与欧洲中心主义在话语理论化方式上的差异。本文指出理解诺莫人(*Nommo*)这个植根于非洲哲学和本体论的核心概念对有效分析和深入理解美国黑人话语至关重要。

I. Author's Brief CV

There is a growing interest in African American rhetoric in the field of communications in the United States today. It has taken almost three decades for mainstream scholars in the United States to accept African American rhetoric as a legitimate field of study as traditional Western rhetoric has enjoyed for time immemorial (Cummings & Roy, 2002). According to Cummings and Daniel (1979), one would be hard pressed to find any nonwestern rhetoric, in particular African American rhetoric, in any book on rhetoric or public address in the 1970s in American academe except for Western rhetoric since neither Black rhetoric nor its rhetors were taken seriously by academics. Granted the communications discipline has changed somewhat in recent times and scholarship on the rhetoric of African

Americans is showing signs of acceptance in the American academy, the communication discipline still lacks in its attention to African American rhetoric. Jackson and Richardson (2003) underscore the need for increased intellectual spaces for African American rhetoric. While there may be some degree of understanding and appreciation of African American rhetoric among American communication scholars, the majority of Americans still have minimal or no knowledge of the rich cultural tradition of African American rhetoric because of the strong dominance of Western or Eurocentric ideas. If most Americans have little or no knowledge of African American rhetoric, the opportunity for understanding and appreciating African American rhetoric among peoples of other cultures is likely even less. Given the increasing trend of globalization, it is important for international scholars whose areas of teaching and scholarship is comparative literature, communications, or rhetorical studies to have an understanding of African American rhetoric. With this knowledge, then, an international scholar will be in a position to appreciate the rich cultural dimensions of African American discourse as manifested in speeches, music, literature, films, and art, among others and how these creative expressions have historically transformed the history, culture and politics of the United States. Only by understanding the culture centered theoretical lens of Afrocentricity will scholars of all stripes be able to have a deeper appreciation of the nuances and subtleties of African American rhetoric.

We write this essay with four caveats in mind. First, we define African American rhetoric as it relates to discourse of Black African descendants about their social, cultural, historical and political experiences in the United States of America. In other words, we do not include rhetorical discourse of African descendants living in Central or South America, or Canada. Second, we have selected excerpts from speeches and rap songs by prominent African American rhetors as examples and not other forms of creative expressions such as poetry and films among others. Third, while we seek to illuminate Afrocentric lens or African centered cultural criticism as it pertains to African American rhetoric, our goal is to provide a general overview of this framework and not a full blown discussion of African American language (Ebonics) and other communicological issues that are not within the purview of this essay. Lastly, we do not suggest that all discourses by African Americans are Afrocentric. Our focus is on African American discourse that we consider Afrocentric in the sense that they are not from a Eurocentric perspective. Furthermore, in order to be Afrocentric, the discourse has to foreground and

represent the issues of African Americans in terms of their unique cultural, historical, and political experiences. In essence, from an Afrocentric view, African American or Black perspective serves as the framework for discourse having its roots in Africa rather than using a Western framework which marginalizes African American or Black roles.

Thus the overarching goal of this essay is to provide a theoretical framework that is grounded in Afrocentricity or African-centered ways of thinking and helps explain African American rhetoric for Chinese scholars and scholars from other non-American cultures. With this in mind, we propose to do the following: first, we provide an overview of the African roots of African American rhetoric; second, we define and explicate the nature of Afrocentricity as a theoretical/methodological framework; third, we explain the notion of *Nommo* and its various characteristics with examples from speeches and songs by famous African Americans to illustrate how *Nommo* functions in African American rhetoric. We conclude our essay by discussing the implications of Afrocentric method of rhetorical criticism for rhetorical critics.

II. The Origins of African American Rhetoric

There is a myth often perpetuated in Western cultures that African Americans attained their culture when they came to the United States of America and were "civilized" by Whites. This kind of erroneous and racist thought negates the idea of the rich cultural heritage of African Americans that goes back to their roots in Africa. Tempels (1959) questioned the notion that Africans had no system of thought and argued that Bantu philosophy was one of the best ways to understand African mentality. African Americans, prior to their enslavement in America, lived in African societies that had worldviews predicating on highly developed religious systems and sophisticated communication styles (Hamlet, 1998). Emotional experience and the power of the spirit played a crucial role in the traditional African religions. Religion permeated all facets of human life and was intimately connected to all realms of human experience and activities. Thus, everything was interrelated. They lived in harmony with gods, nature, animals and other fellow beings, which meant that there were no boundaries between "the sacred and the secular, religious and the nonreligious, spiritual and material areas of life" (Hamlet, 1998: 90). Consequently, to destroy one element would cause destruction in the other elements of their existence as well.

The nature of interaction between the individual and the group in African societies is another important element that distinguishes African societies from Western ones. A common strand that is found in every African community is the deeply sustained and reflected belief in the survival of tribal kinship. In the tradition of African communal ethos and values, it is always the community that created, defined and shaped the individual and not vice versa. This has major implications in that an individual did not exist unless s/he was part of a tribe or community (Mbiti, 1970). And in such African societies oral discourse played a key role in maintaining order and harmony and helped foster closer ties with one another. Ong has called attention to how the past is "present in the speech and social institutions" of oral cultures, "not in the more abstract forms in which modern history deals" (1967: 23). He has also noted that there are oral cultures whose members are encouraged to think of the universe as "a harmony, something held together as a sound or group of sounds, a symphony, is held together (Ong, 1969: 31). Ong's (1967; 1969) descriptions are true of African cultures. The oral tradition, therefore, was very much at the heart of African existence and could not exist apart from the mutual compatibility of the entire traditional world view (Smith, 1972: 366). According to Asante (1990), African American oral tradition can be linked to African customs such as storytelling, proverbs, riddles, and various forms of verbal interplay. Similarly, Woodson (1936/1968) traced African oral tradition to the notions of lyricality and song in Africa. It is no wonder then that there is a strong emphasis on orality among African Americans because of its strong cultural roots in Africa before their enslavement in America.

The oral tradition of African American rhetoric that has its origins in Africa can be distinguished from the written tradition of the Western world by its profound concern for coherence and stability of the communities. All forms of oral discourse in African communities require verbal emphasis along with the unleashing of the power of the spoken word (Smith, 1972). Expression has a special place not only in speech but also in music and there is a close interrelationship between the two, namely, speech and music (Smith, 1972). In the African American community, which has its roots in the African oral tradition, a rhetor with her/his creative expression through speech, tone, volume, rhythm and delivery seeks to bring about harmony in the community. Garner and Calloway-Thomas state that the oral discourse tradition is central to African American culture "because of the composite yet shared heritage within the Black community and because the structural

underpinnings of the oral tradition remain basically intact even as each new generation makes verbal adaptations with the tradition. Indeed, the core strength of this tradition lies in its capacity to accommodate new situations and changing realities" (2003: 46). Therefore any attempt to understand and critique African American rhetoric without knowledge of Afrocentricity or African centeredness will inevitably limit our abilities to do so.

III. Definition and Nature of Afrocentricity

Since the publication of Molefi Kete Asante's *Afrocentricity: Theory of Social Change* in the 1980s, there have been various definitions and perspectives on the term of Afrocentricity. Jackson informs us that the term "Afrocentricity has been attached as a label to describe everything from one's cosmological orientation and theoretical posture to the clothes and hairstyle one wears" (2003: 119). Therefore, it is critically important to have a clear understanding of this term and a method for analyzing African American rhetoric. According to Asante (1987), who is regarded as the father of Afrocentricity, Afrocentricity encompasses all facets of African American life: psychological, political, social, cultural and economic, combining knowledge from branches of philosophy, science, history, and mythology to explain the condition of African Americans. For Asante, Afrocentricity implies the "most complete philosophical totalization of the African being-at-the-center of his or her existence" (1987: 125). Therefore, the goal of Afrocentricity is to question and challenge Eurocentric thinking that "seek ungrounded aggrandizement by claiming universal hegemony" (Jackson, 2003: 120). As an alternative philosophical/ theoretical paradigm to Eurocentrism, Afrocentricity seeks to introduce, sustain, and celebrate the totality of the people of African heritage in this world (Jackson, 2003). Asante (1987) explains that Afrocentrcity as a theoretical and methodological tool is grounded in the philosophy of struggle and resistance by people of African descent.

The term Afrocentricity is not a race-defining label, as there are Eurocentric African Americans as well as Afrocentric Europeans (Hamlet, 1998: xii). Indeed, Afrocentricity refers to a worldview and philosophical assumptions (epistemological, ontological, axiological, cosmological) that manifest themselves in the culture and behavior of African American people and others of the African Diaspora. The world view and cultural assumptions that have been preserved and developed by African American people include essential qualities of the African world view, emphasizing the metaphysical rather than purely physical interconnectedness in the realm of art,

music, religion and in relationships among humans and nature. This is why African American minds seek to function in a holistic manner, perceiving the unity of all things (Myers, 1998).

Dixon (1976), Harris (1998) and Kershaw (1998), among others, identify and articulate the philosophical underpinnings of Afrocentricity. In the ontological dimension, African Americans perceive reality as both spiritual and material. According to Asante (1988), African Americans appreciate the dynamic nature of the spirit and matter and do not necessarily distinguish one from the other. Epistemologically, self-knowledge becomes the basis of all knowledge, and manifests itself through symbolic imagery and rhythm. Axiologically, the growth and development of one's being rest on human relationships that are accorded the highest value in the African American community (Myers, 1998). This approach of looking at everything as being interrelated and interdependent demonstrates the idea of holonomy, wherein the whole is contained in each of its parts (Myers, 1998). Afrocentric ontology thus emphasizes the communal spirit through which individuals find their meaning and self-worth in relationships with the community, nature and the Supreme Being.

Furthermore, Afrocentric thinking focuses on the unchanging essence of things, and understands that only external form changes. In accordance with this worldview, efforts are made to let outward materiality evolve in conformity with underlying spirit, with the ultimate result emerging as far superior to anything that is presented in the Eurocentric perspective, with its emphasis on material essences. Afrocentrists warn of negative consequences of the material ontology as valued in the Eurocentric perspective. Since materiality is characteristically finite and limited, this kind of conceptual framework often promotes disharmony in human life (Myers, 1998). Based on all the major Afrocentric theorists, the Eurocentric approach not only diametrically opposes Afrocentric ways of thinking, but it also functions in a way that devalues Afrocentric assumptions and values.

Asante clarifies the overarching goal of Afrocentricity as thus:

> Afrocentricty—seeks agency and action, and the other—Africanity—broadcasts identity and being. Actually, Africanity refers in its generality to all of the customs, traditions, and traits of people of Africa and the diaspora. On the other hand, Afrocentricity is very specific in its reliance on self-conscious action. (1987: 19)

For Asante (1987), Afrocentric discourse seeks to liberate Africans by focusing on human agency as the key concept for freedom and liberation. Asante sums up the goals of Afrocentric discourse as resistance to oppression, liberation from stereotypes, and action in anticipation of reaction (1987: 185). Asante reminds us that a truly Afrocentric rhetoric is:

> combative, antagonistic, and wholly committed to the propagation of a more humanistic vision of the world. Its foundation is necessarily the slave narrative. Its rhythms are harmonious, discordant, only to those who have refused to accept either the truth of themselves or the possibility of other frames of reference. (1987: 186)

From an Afrocentric perspective, there are major implications for African American rhetoric. Asante explains, Afrocentric rhetoric is the "productive thrust of language into the unknown in an attempt to create harmony and balance in the midst of disharmony" (1987: 35). Daniel and Smitherman (1976) and Hamlet (1994; 1998) also underscore the importance of balance and harmony in the African American community, and it is through the creative power of the spoken word, *Nommo*, that the African American communicator brings about harmony and balance. All Afrocentric scholars acknowledge this generative power of language, commonly known as *Nommo*. Smith explains that African Americans have "cultivated [a] natural fascination with *Nommo*, the word, and demonstrated a singular appreciation for the subtleties, pleasures and potentials of the spoken word which has continued to enrich and embolden [their] history" (1970: 296). Yet, *Nommo* goes beyond the mere use of words, phrases or linguistic conventions. It also signifies the generating and sustaining powers of language that inform every facet of African American life. As Hamlet (1994) points out, language constitutes the life force, the productive power in African American culture. In the words of Smitherman:

> [A]ll the activities of [wo]men, and all the movements in nature, rest on the productive power of the word, which is water and heat and seed and *Nommo*, that is, the life force itself....The force, responsibility and commitment of the word, and the awareness that the word alone alters the world. (1986: 78-79)

Thus, *Nommo* in Afrocentricity signifies the generative power of the spoken word. The generative function of *Nommo* stems from its focus on collectivity,

which is the essence of African American spirituality. According to Hamlet (1998), *Nommo* is considered necessary not only to actualize life but also to give people a mastery over things. *Nommo*'s presence can be felt in all facets of African American life, including interpersonal, group, public or mass communication events in which African culture and experiences are fused. It is the quality of *Nommo* that has shaped the perception of African Americans to regard a communication event not just as an act where words are spoken in the presence of an audience, but a communal experience where those words, songs, dance, etc., give life and meaning to the event.

Scholars such as Knowles-Borishade have looked at the power of the spoken word or *Nommo* from a more spiritual perspective. She argues that morality is the *sin qua non* in African orature: "Nommo gains in power and effectiveness in direct proportion with the moral character, strength of commitment and vision of the [individual], as well as the skills he or she exhibits." The rhetor, in her opinion, must "direct his or her creative powers toward a higher level of consciousness by activating spiritual and psychic powers" (1991: 490). Knowles-Borishade also states that "Africans traditionally view humanity as a spiritual force and the speaker is seen as having the ability to tap cosmic forces for a higher truth by merging his or her vibratory forces with the rhythmic vibrations of the universal cosmic energy" (490-491). Thus, according to her, *Nommo* is the manifestation of "Afri-symbols", which in African context implies that the word is "pregnant with value-meanings drawn from the African experience, which, when uttered, give birth to unifying images that bind people together in an atmosphere of harmony and power" (490). This just explains the magical and mystical power of *Nommo*.

Hamlet lists ten characteristics or manifestations of *Nommo* in African American rhetoric. They are: rhythm, soundin' out, repetition, stylin', lyrical qualities, improvisation, historical perspective, indirection, mythoforms, and call-and-response (1998: 93). In the Afrocentric perspective, rhythm, like speech, must coincide with the generative power of the word so that the communicator, word and audience are all of one accord. Rhythm plays a crucial role in Afrocentric discourse. It is that force that helps to bring about harmony. Rhythm in the African American context is described as "the architecture of being [...] only rhythm gives [the word] its effective fullness" (Jahn, 1961: 161). Asante sees rhythm as the "basis of African American

transcendence" (1987: 38). Rhythm demonstrates how well a speaker regulates his/her flow of words with correct pauses and intensifications. In African American culture, words are often expressed musically and rhythmically and function as a basic measure of how successful the speaker is (Asante, 1987). An example of the use of rhythm in African American rhetoric is found in the message of the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., in Harlem, New York, in the 1960s when he addressed one of the largest Protestant congregations. He said:

> It's is not the color of your skin, brother
> It's what you have in your hearts and in your minds
> that makes you a man or a woman. Remember that.
> And if you will stand together there's nobody in
> this world that can stop a united mass of people
> Moving as one ...
> Standing together
> Working together
> Picketing together
> Loving together
> Worshipping together
> You'll win together
> Walk together, children, don't you get weary
> There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land. (Hamlet, 1998: 94)

A second characteristic of *Nommo* is called "soundin' out." This refers to a speaker's creative manipulation of volume and musical quality in the delivery of the message. It is the dynamic and creative use of "soundin' out" that revitalizes and reenergizes an African American discourse (Hamlet, 1998). Asante (1987) describes how Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X effectively employed "soundin' out" by varying their vocal tones, accents and using creative pauses that helped create a great sense of bonding between them and their audiences. In order to gain a fuller understanding as to how "soundin' out" functions in African American speeches one needs to listen to the oratory of Rev. King and Malcolm X.

Repetition for intensification is also a common characteristic of African American speakers and certainly a focus of *Nommo*. Hamlet (1998) states that repetition is often used by African American rhetors for impact and effect. For

example, prominent African American leader, Minister Louis Farrakhan (1989), leader of the Nation of Islam, said:

> When you know *self*
> Then you can take anything to learn
> And relate it to *self*
> And coming through *self*
> you can build institutions for *self.*

Stylin', as a characteristic of *Nommo*, refers to the conscious or unconscious use of language and/or mannerisms on the part of the communicator to create favorable influence on the audience (Hamlet, 1998). According to Asante, stylin' involves a variety of behaviors, including both visual and audio: "Visual stylin' is effected by gestural or symbolic mannerisms. While the most common type of gesture in communication is purposive movement for meaning and emphasis, conscious stylin' is highly regarded by Black speakers and hearers" (1987: 50). On the other hand, "symbolic mannerisms, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., touching the small upper pocket on his coat, are also a matter of visual stylin'. This gesture lends presence to the speaker, who, in taking this liberty, shows the audience that he or she is not an average speaker but someone capable of handling the platform tasks with ease" (Asante, 1987: 50).

Other forms of visual stylin' may include creative arrangement of the environment or the dress or other visual aspects of the speaker (Asante, 1987). For example, Queen Latifah, a prominent female rap artist, was an instant attraction because of her Afrocentric stylin'. As Roberts points out:

> Queen Latifah's style and dress and rap itself are
> Afrocentric; through them she looks to Africa for inspiration ...
> Her regal bearing, her name and her self-promotion associate her with
> a tradition of African royalty. Through her attire, she draws attention
> to styles and colors that are African in their ethos. Her military dress
> and the colors that she wears (red, black, and green) evoke the African
> National Congress. (1994: 247)

Audio stylin', on the other hand, refers to the variations of "pronunciations, intercalations, and malapropisms. Words are frequently intoned to give them a