Telling the Story: Kansas City Mayor and United Methodist Pastor Emanuel Cleaver's Use of Storytelling to Transcend Rhetorical Barriers

Shauntae Brown White

Storytelling and the oral tradition have long been entrenched in the African American cultural community. Born on the continent of Africa, the griot (storyteller) has several functions. The primary function of the griot is to preserve the social customs and values of the culture and to contribute to social stability as an instrument for avoiding direct confrontation. Former Kansas City mayor and United Methodist Pastor Emanuel Cleaver functions a modern-day griot. With his primary rhetorical strategy of storytelling, Cleaver is able to transcend rhetorical barriers and discuss controversial topics in a non-confrontational way.

In March of 1991, the political face of Kansas City, Missouri, changed as the city's first African American mayor was elected to office. Having worked on the city council since the late 1970s, Mayor Emanuel Cleaver had developed the political savvy needed to lead a city. As a United Methodist pastor of a 1,800-member African American church, the Rev. Emanuel Cleaver understood the power of the spoken word and the oratorical skills required of a public person.

During his two-term tenure as mayor, Emanuel Cleaver has been credited for the growth of Kansas City's local economy, population and renewed city pride (Abouhalkah, 1999; Diuguid, 1998; *Missouri State Post*, 1999). In addition, Cleaver was committed to improving race relations, and his initiative to address the issue—The Mayor's Task Force on Race Relations—was used as a national model for President Clinton's race board (Diuguid, 1998). While hailed as an effective political leader, his vocation as a spiritual leader seemed

Shauntae Brown White is an assistant professor at Miami University of Ohio where she has a joint appointment in Black World Studies and Communication. She received her Ph.D. in communication studies from the University of Kansas. Dr. White's research interests include African American public address, African American women and hair politics, and the culture of the black church.

Journal of African American Studies, Spring 2006, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 32-44.

White

to have a significant impact on his mayoral tenure. The *Missouri State Post* (1999) described his civic life as being infused with religious values such as "tolerance, inclusion, justice, the well being for all ... the never ending quest for racial harmony and understanding." Term limits prohibited him from running for re-election, but in 1999 he left office with a 71% approval rating (S. Jackson, personal communication, March 9, 2000). After a nearly five-year hiatus from public service, in 2004 Cleaver was elected to U.S. Congress.

Rhetorically skilled and a master storyteller, Emanuel Cleaver skillfully crafted his personae in several different rhetorical contexts: secular, sacred, African American and white. While Cleaver was able to create identification with various audiences, he is clearly rooted in African American culture. One of his primary strategies for creating identification with his audience is his use of storytelling. Traditionally, griots (African storytellers) served several functions including performing rituals, entertaining and educating, But, their primary function was to educate people about themselves. It is through Cleaver's use of storytelling that I argue that he is a modern-day griot, and was able to create identification in several different contexts and different audiences. This essay will provide a brief background to the theoretical approach to Afrocentricity and its importance to oral communication, the historical background and origin of storytelling in the African and African American community and finally offer an analysis for what makes Cleaver's stories effective.

Afrocentric Discourse: An Overview

While the term Afrocentricity was developed by Molefi K. Asante in 1980, it is not a new idea. For instance, before the term was coined, A. Smith (1972b), Daniel (1974), Daniel and Smitherman (1976), and Smitherman (1977) all made seminal contributions to culture-centered analyses about African American communication. Although Afrocentric theory is not uniquely related to the communication discipline, many scholars have developed approaches to applying the theory to the discourse and communication of African Americans. While Afrocentric communication scholars are in agreement as to what is classified as Afrocentric discourse, a unified method has not been developed. This section provides a brief summary of what communication scholars prescribed as Afrocentric discourse.

Smith (1972a) and Smitherman (1976) would agree that in both times of slavery and now, the African American community places high value on the spoken word in comparison to the written word. Coupled with the fact that Africans have a strong oral tradition, and African Americans were forbidden to read and write, African Americans cultivated their natural fascination with nommo—the power of the spoken word. Afrocentric communication scholars would agree nommo is a fundamental tenet of Afrocentricity (Asante, 1987; Brummett, 1995; Bowers, 1995; Garner, 1994; Hamlet, 1998; Harrison & Harrison, 1993; Jackson, II, 1995; Shaw, 1995; Woodyard, 1995). Nommo has generating and sustaining powers, and can influence all the activities of people as well as movement in nature (Smith, 1972a). Nommo speaks creation into being, activates the spirit through vibrant sounds and vocal rhythm

and is considered the greatest power on earth to be able to speak harmony where there is chaos and disorder (Knowles-Borishade, 1991). Oral communication was a fundamental means of transmitting information and ideas. While communicating with different ethnic and linguistic clans was virtually impossible for enslaved Africans, the universal regard for nommo contributed to the creation of other forms of communication such as songs, Ebonics (Black English), sermons and spirituals that often times were double entendres (Smith, 1972b).

Nommo is comprehensive and can take the form of drumming, singing, storytelling, myth, ritual, proverbs, black preaching, poetry, lectures, humor, boasting, signifying and the dozens (Asante, 1987; Garner, 1994; Shaw, 1995; Smith, 1998). Nommo also is transforming—the word "sounding good" is just as important as the content with the use of such characteristics as rhythm, repetition, a lyrical approach to language, invoking a call and response pattern where the speaker receives some kind of verbal or non-verbal affirmation of their message from the audience, and the use of image-making (Asante, 1987; Hamlet, 1998; Harrison & Harrison, 1993; Jackson, II, 1995; Smitherman, 1977). Additionally, characteristics most related to this study would be the use of historical perspective—using illustrations from African and African American history and culture to provide wisdom, guidance and strength; use of mythoforms—using a body of stories that appeals to the consciousness of people by embodying its cultural ideas and values; and the use of indirection—making a point in a roundabout fashion or "stalking the issue."

The ultimate goal of nommo is to achieve harmony and unity—the second tenet of Afrocentricity. Asante posits, "Rhetoric, in an Afrocentric sense, is the productive thrust of language into the unknown in an attempt to create harmony and balance in the midst of disharmony and indecision" (Asante, 1987, 35). An Afrocentric mind is highly communal rather than individualistic. In fact, within Afrocentricity, collective achievement is valued while individual achievement is shunned (Asante, 1987). Daniel and Smitherman (1976) argue that African society is patterned after the natural rhythms of the universe, whereas, "I" and "we" are one and the same; "I" and "we" cannot have meaning apart from one another. In Afrocentric discourse, this union is achieved when the audience says the collective "amen" to discourse either through vocal or symbolic acknowledgement. Harmony serves as empowerment to move toward the actions or solutions that are presented by the speaker, and sanctioned by the responders.

In essence, the power of the spoken word is an essential tenet of Afrocentricity. Moreover, a second essential tenant is achieving harmony and unity between the speaker and the audience. This offers a brief summary of two of the primary tenants of Afrocentricity. Cleaver, a master storyteller, often uses stories to inform his audience of a moral imperative. His stories are often infused with historical perspective, mythoform and indirection to create harmony with his audience. In the discussion below, I trace the origins of the African storyteller—the griot. While many of the griots stories were entertaining, the primary function of storytelling was didactic—to educate. Cleaver's stories function much in the same way.

Storytelling in the African and African American Community

African Americans have a strong oral tradition that is the product of African culture and American slavery (Asante, 1987; Daniel & Smitherman, 1976; Hamlet, 1998; Knowles-Borishade, 1991; A. Smith, 1972; Smitherman, 1977)). The oral tradition is not unique to the African Diaspora, but is one of many cultures that have a strong oral tradition (Smitherman, 1977). Oral tradition is an intergenerational form of communication that implies some notion of continuity (Goody, 1992). It is the passing on of commonly held values as well as legacies by word of mouth and memory (Stallings, 1988).

The practice of storytelling has ancient and deep ties in Africa. In their work recording the oral epics from Africa, Johnson, Hales and Belcher (1997) found that though African countries have different oral traditions, the griot is common to them all. The griots or oral artists served three functions: to perform rituals, entertain, or educate (Boadu, 1985). The griots were the official bearers of tradition. Also known as bards, they were responsible for telling legend, old stories of deeds of heroes, and riddles and tales of the tribe, clan or culture on numerous occasions (Bird, 1971; Johnson, Hales, & Belcher, 1997; Kouyate, 1989; Smitherman, 1977).

Just as the stories told by the African griot were used to instruct about morals and life skills, so too were the slave tales. These tales were often infused with a direct moral message and were widely used for didactic purposes to teach one how to live and act. Levine (1977, p. 90) argues, "The didactic elements in these stories were rarely specific or technical, but embodied in the moral of the tale itself." The same stories were told by slaves as well as free men and women—they were relevant and necessary. While many of the slave stories had religious messages, the majority of them dealt with everyday human relationships. Although these didactic tales attempted to educate people about proper conduct and living, but they were also filled with strategies of survival, for example—reticence and caution were taught as necessities.

Stories serve a powerful function in not only the African American culture, but others, as well. Stories help us to make sense of our worlds and help us to know ourselves in the midst of incompleteness (Stallings, 1988). They also impose order on the flow of experience and allow us to interpret reality because they help us decide what a particular experience is about and with whom various elements of our experiences are connected (Foss, 1996). Stories help give order to the human experience and encourage others around us to establish means of common living (Fisher, 1984).

Not only do stories help us to make sense of our reality, but they can also serve as a form of indirection. As defined above, indirection is when the rhetoric makes a point by "stalking the issue." The points are made by the power of innuendo and suggestion. Asante posits, "We like to have our knowledge, our information, brought to us on the basis of indirection and the story serves that purpose preeminently" (1987, p. 491). If slavery birthed the African American folk story, there was no greater institution to nurture this oral tradition than the African American church, and possibly no greater storyteller within that community than the African American preacher.

Journal of African American Studies / Spring 2006

One of the first ideas to understand is the relationship between the sacred and the secular in the sermon. In his case study on African American sermons, Davis (1985) argues that what makes an African American sermon successful is the tension between the secular and sacred dynamic, and the most successful sermons, are those that include both the generalized (abstracted) sacred elements with the specific references to the secular elements.

One of the primary strategies used in African American preaching is storytelling (Hamlet, 1994; Mitchell, 1991). In her comparison of the African griot and the folk preacher, J. Jackson (1981) found several similarities between the two arguing that the folk preacher in the United States emerged during the period of slavery in the tradition of his cultural predecessor, the West African griot. "Both the griot and the preacher deal with heroic material and draw upon a particular wellspring of imagery which is usually fitted into a metrical pattern" (206). They both functioned as mediators between the masses of people and those in authority and power within their society. The griot, and to some degree the preacher, had a monopoly on the speech-related functions in his culture, and both functioned as moral instructors.

The most striking parallel between the griot and the preacher occurs in the performance practice. The griot told stories to music, which could help account for the preacher's (and later other African American rhetors) use of rhythm, one of the characteristics of nommo and the word "sounding good." Rhythm, timing, and tonal voice are significant aspects of the preacher's art. The congregation's response also plays a key role with the call and response leading to the collective amen. Contemporary storytelling in the African American community has an enduring and long history whose origins go back to Africa. The griot's function was to perform rituals, entertain, but most importantly educate its community about their traditions and history, themselves, and provide moral instruction. Similar to the griot's stories, slave folk stories also served a didactic function. The African American preacher, it could be argued, is one of the greatest storytellers in the African American community. Preacher-politician Emanuel Cleaver's rhetoric provides an exemplar.

Cleaver as Griot: An Analysis

Through his speaking style and themes in both his sermons and his political speeches, it is clear that Emanuel Cleaver is a product of the African American church. While storytelling is not unique to the African American culture, it is a dominant strategy found in the black sermon. Rarely will African American preachers deliver their message in a linear fashion (Mitchell, 1990; Smitherman, 1977). Rather, Smitherman asserts, "the thematic motif is dramatized with gestures, movement, plot, real-life characterization and circumlocutory rhetorical flourishes" (150). The use of a story allows the preacher to make abstract, general ideas concrete and meaningful.

Cleaver has embraced the practice of storytelling in his sermons delivered to both African American and mixed audiences. However, he does not employ the use of stories with the same frequency in his political speeches. Out

White

of the twenty-five texts analyzed for this study, fifty-six stories were identified and examined. On average, Cleaver employed 3.6 stories in his sermons. In some sermons, he used as many as five to six stories. While his storytelling style can also be found in his political speeches, they are not as pervasive, especially in his deliberative speeches. Though Cleaver does not use as many stories in his political speeches, regardless of audience, he does employ many "snapshots" of stories, which are labeled as anecdotes, and he still speaks in a circular fashion. The same imagery, metaphors and detailed description it takes to make a good story, are the same ingredients he uses without the character, action or plot development of a story. Cleaver heavily relies on metaphors and other forms of description to make his points. Since much of the literature on African American storytelling discusses its function rather than its form, I borrow from Foss' (1996) definition of narrative, which defines it as a "way of ordering and presenting a view of the world through description of a situation involving characters, action, and settings" (400).

Cleaver's stories are entertaining; many of them involve humor. However, Mitchell asserts that when one uses a story, it should be entertaining because the opposite of entertaining is not educational, but boring (Mitchell, 1990). Like the African griot and the African American storyteller who told slave and animal tales, Cleaver's stories are primarily didactic—they serve an educational function. The overwhelming majority of stories examined in the texts were didactic; there were two that were not and just told for interest. There was a moral to be learned from each story. The audience can implicitly learn many of the lessons, but in most cases, Cleaver explicitly states the moral he wants the audience to learn at the end of each story.

As discussed in the literature review, the griot's chief function was to educate people about themselves and their ancestors. Similarly, the slave narratives provided moral instructions for right living and conduct, and survival skills. The majority of the slave narrative themes addressed everyday human relationships, which is congruent with the Afrocentric idea of community and relational ethics. Smitherman (1977) cites additional themes such as: coping abilities, strength, endurance and the power of African Americans. Cleaver's stories function much in the same way as the African griot and the slave narrative storyteller as he addresses human relationships and provides guidelines for right conduct. The stories don't necessarily inform the audience about their ancestors, but they do inform them about who they are and the human condition. Cleaver's stories also address relational ethics and set the standard for how the audience should treat and relate to one another.

Ultimately, Cleaver uses stories to help the audience look at themselves and their flaws in a non-confrontational way. While Cleaver uses the stories to instruct a moral lesson, the stories are also a form of indirection. Indirection, as reviewed in the literature, is an Afrocentric device employed by speakers who meander around the point or "stalk the issue." Speakers make a point by the power of innuendo and suggestion. Stories are just one of the rhetorical strategies a speaker can use to accomplish indirection. For Cleaver, using a story allows him to "call out" the flaws that the audience has without doing it in a confrontational manner. Through the use of humor in his stories, Cleaver is able to disarm and diffuse the defenses of the audiences so that they may take the time to get the moral of the story.

The following excerpts are from two different sermons that demonstrate how he uses stories to confront the audience.

A few years ago while in Dallas to preach, I went to lunch at a Chili's Restaurant, not bar, from the hotel where I was staying. While waiting for my lunch to be served, I noticed across the room a table of six young white people. They seemed to have their attention focused on me. They would look over and snicker. I would look at them and they'd drop their hands and snicker. Then they would punch each other. I began to get upset. I decided that they were making racial jokes about me and poking fun at my expense. My temperature began to rise. By the time the waitress delivered my lunch, my temperature was 109.6°. So, I began giving them grizzly glares.

I had begun to figure out how I could fight all six of them. I had imagined that I was going to pick up a chair and I was going over there... (audience laughter). I'm serious. I had it all figured out. And as I sipped on my tea staring at them, a young woman began moving cautiously toward my table. And I thought to myself, "I could whip her" (audience laughter).

But she immediately disarmed me with an engaging smile and soft words when she said, "Excuse me, sir. I apologize for interrupting your lunch, but we've been over there arguing over whether or not you are Richard Pryor." I had spent 30 minutes of my life that I can never ever get back fighting a sham battle with six folks who wanted my autograph (Cleaver, Feb. 2, 1997).

This first excerpt is from Cleaver's sermon "Sham Battles." In this story, he presents a moral, which suggests that the audience ought not to waste their time fighting "sham battles," or worthless fights. While this story is directly out of his personal experience, it is an experience—thinking about worthless things—to which many, if not most, people can relate. The power of the story is the universal appeal to the human experience. In "Wait for the Lord," Cleaver tells a story from his experience as an adolescent to show how the audience tries to rush God.

When I was a teen, I spent my summers working in my uncle's lawn service. I developed a strong appreciation for yard work. I loved that job, except for the fact that we had to do one family's yard, T.A. Littakens. And, it wasn't the yard that was the problem; it was the little demon boy who they had given birth to.

And, from time to time, I would arrive on Saturday and the little boy would just follow me around trying to get his hand cut off in the lawnmower, or trying to do whatever, you know, so that his parents would have me hung. And so, and, you know, I was constantly, just worried trying to work and worry about this son of the devil who just followed me all day. And, they knew it and wouldn't come get him.

And, then one bright spring morning, he stood watching as I weeded this beautiful, beautiful, gorgeous rose garden. Every week. I would turn over the dirt, take the weeds out, and make it real pretty, just, just sprinkle it with some water. And, that garden was goin' be beautiful. The lil' boy came over as I was weeding it and said, "When are the roses gonna show?"

And so I explained that they would blossom in a couple of weeks or so. The next Saturday I arrived, and he was nowhere to be seen, and I should have known that something was wrong. Then, when I approached the rose garden, I mean, I screamed in disbelief and horror. I found each bud torn open with all the soft petals broken and pressed back until the inside was kind of bare to the sun. And, then I spotted that little poltergeist standing in the door of the screened-in porch. And, I walked over to the porch with the hoe in my hand, trying hard to control my anger.

So, I softly asked, "Er Tommy, er what happened to the roses?" He said, "Well, I couldn't wait any longer so I blossomed them myself." Tommy had tried to do, with his tiny little fingers and his immature mind, what only God could have done to bring forth into full blossom the beauty of a rosebud (Cleaver, July 18, 1996).

While these two stories are both humorous and entertaining, they both have a didactic function, as well. Both stories provide a concrete visual image of the problems that exist with people. They both fulfill Mitchell's requirements for a successful sermonic story which includes: the preacher must tell a story as if the telling were an end in its own right; the preacher tells it as if he or she is an eyewitness; the preacher plays all the roles to make the story come alive; and the preacher must ensure that the audience has "seen" all the action. In addition, the audience should be given an opportunity to relate to and learn from the characters. Cleaver does these things successfully. Instead of directly saying to the audience, "you are impatient," and "you concern yourselves with things that are inconsequential," the stories allow the audience to put themselves in place of the characters. It is the expectation of Cleaver for the audience to identify with a character in the story and examine their lives. In the case of latter story, the audience is expected to identify with Tommy and see themselves as also being guilty of their "immature minds" trying to outthink God.

In most of Cleaver's stories, he wants the audience to put themselves in the place of the character who has the flaw. While it certainly is not shameful to be concerned with sham battles and trying to outsmart God—it may simply be our nature, Cleaver uses stories to address less acceptable human flaws. In an excerpt from "Stuck Up People," Cleaver addresses the issue of abandoning one another when it is convenient.

A man went out, with one of his buddies, into the wilderness to male bond, spend the weekend together. They are sitting out there in the wilderness one morning drinking coffee, having just got up and awake in their tent, and they looked down the trail and headed right towards them is a full grown grizzly, moving fast. One of the men stopped, pulled up his Nike tennis shoes and started putting them on. The other man said, "Hey, you don't think you can out run that bear do you?" And he said, "Naw, I think I can out run you." Too many of us are willing to leave our folk with the bear. We just want to out run. We want to give somebody to the bear. It doesn't matter who it is, just so it ain't me (Cleaver, February 23, 1998).

Cleaver has a broad repertoire of stories; overwhelmingly, his stories come from his personal experiences. Of the 56 stories I identify, 28 were from his personal experiences and life observations. Sixteen of the stories were "traveling stories," stories that have been passed along, which may or may not be true, and nine were stories from the Bible. Davis (1985), suggests that what makes an African American sermon successful is the tension between the secular and the sacred as the sermon speaks to the needs of its audience. Davis argues that while the African American sermon has a religious purpose, the preacher can "encourage his congregation to consider the quality of their lives, particularly with respect to sets of principles previously acknowledged to be useful in one's secular existence" (105). In other words, as in each of these excerpts, Cleaver takes experience from the secular world and uses it to demonstrate moral lessons to be learned in the sacred realm.

Davis' explanation can offer insight on how sermons function with African American audiences, but I argue that this same logic can apply to different audiences as well. In his sermon "A Left-Handed Army" where Cleaver is speaking to a Jewish audience, he employs four stories and all of them are culture-specific references. Included in his topics of stories are: playing the dozens in college with other African American athletes, the African American Civil War Regimen, his family history which included being purchased as slaves, and an anecdote about growing up in the projects of Texas.

Since this study is not directly analyzing the effectiveness of the speech on the audience, there is no way to substantiate the claim that Cleaver was effective in this situation. Assuming that the sermon was effective, one possible reason is while the audience did not have the exact experience, they have gone through something similar. While some of the stories are culture-specific, Cleaver appeals to the broad spectrum of human emotions. The restaurant story told in the sermon "Sham Battles," was told to an African American audience. However, I argue that the same story could be told to a non-African American audience, or even an audience whose group members have not experienced racism and discrimination. Yet, the power of this story, and the others, is that most people have experienced paranoia. This is true for the story with Tommy, the boy who forced the flowers to bloom. The audience, who most can identify with Tommy, has experienced impatience with others as well as God.

Most of Cleaver's characters are ordinary people with ordinary problems, much like the audience. For the most part, there is nothing extraordinary about the characters. Through the characters, the audience can examine the complexities of human nature without being threatened or offended because ultimately, Cleaver is asking the audience to look at themselves. Among the human flaws and complexities presented in these characters, and with which the audience, too, struggles: being selfish, self-absorbed, impatient, looking at the worst in people and situations, thinking too small, allowing fear to control them, being ungrateful, and wasting time and energy.

Cleaver also celebrates the power of the human spirit. While Cleaver uses ordinary people, he often pays homage to the spiritual ancestors and the elders, a characteristic of Afrocentric discourse through the use of both mythoforms and historical perspective. He often recognizes the model of integrity and initiative his father presented for him growing up in Texas. He also quite frequently references the tenacity and ingenuity of his grandmothers, the long line of preachers in his family, and the people in the "village" who White

helped raise him. Mrs. Alma Holland is a character that the audience gets to know on at least two occasions from the texts collected. At the 1996 National Democratic Convention, Cleaver mentions the impact that this woman, his English teacher, had on his ability to speak in front of an audience. But in the excerpt from the sermon "There is a God Somewhere," the audience gets to know her in another way:

When I spoke at the Democratic Convention, I mentioned Mrs. A.E. Holland, who was my English teacher. I thought Mrs. Holland hated me, even though, on many occasions, she would give me lunch money. We didn't have a lot of money in my household. She would give me lunch money. Mrs. Holland would force me to stand up in front of the class and speak. I thought that she was meaner to me than she was to anybody because anytime I would say "uh" as I spoke, if I said "uh, uh, uh," she would come up to me with a ruler and say hold your hand out. She would hit me for every uh, every uh.

She forced me to speak without saying uh, uh, uh, uh. When I found out that Mrs. Holland loved me was my junior year. I had become a starter on the football team thought that I was real big stuff. The workbook that we had at the beginning of the year was just terrible. During the season, I mean, I just kind of did what I could do or would do. It was red from the front of the workbook. Everywhere was red. And, then, I realized that the semester was going to end, and unless my Daddy moved out of town, I was going to get a junior beating (laughter).

So, I began to try to work hard at the end. And, I ended up getting out of the course with a "B". Probably didn't deserve a "B;" I may have deserved a "C". But, I worked real hard and when my daddy came over to the school at the end of the semester like all the other parents, he went to Mrs. Holland's classroom and she gave him the workbook. And, I thought to myself, "Man, this woman is brutal."

Why would she do this to me? Give it to my daddy. And, I stood up against the wall looking at my daddy look through that workbook. And, I thought well, it sure would have been nice to live to be a senior (laughter). And, daddy was smiling. My daddy was looking through the workbook smiling. Well, my daddy left the room he kind of hit me on the back as if to say, "good going son." I thought my daddy had kind of flipped out. I couldn't wait. I ran over and got my workbook, picked it up and I just saw good grades. Mrs. Holland had torn out all of the red marks from the beginning of the semester and only left the good grades. There's a God in Heaven (Cleaver, September 29, 1996).

From characters such as Mrs. Holland, Cleaver teaches the audience about grace, sacrifice, perseverance, work ethic and initiative, tenacity and the power of the human spirit. In addition to the people in his own life, Cleaver also acknowledges the audiences' collective elders and ancestors. He often invokes the presence of Martin Luther King, Jr., who had a profound effect on him, through telling his life story. All of his characters are ordinary people, with ordinary problems and some have demonstrated extraordinary virtue.

While Cleaver challenges the audience to examine their shortcomings, he never leaves the audience doomed. He provides characters with which the audience can identify in order to get the audience to examine their own lives. However, Cleaver's fundamental purpose for the story is to challenge and inspire the audience to change. In the sermon, obviously the change comes with God. Cleaver creates a community between himself and his audience by showing how they all are connected by the human condition. The connection is shown through his stories and his appeals to the values and needs of people. Cleaver's stories enable him to confront the audience about their flaws and frailties in a non-confrontational way. But they also function in a way that unites the audience in the human condition. The stories, though many of them are culture-specific, appeal to human emotions that are not African American or white, Jewish or Hispanic, but are universal. In sum, Cleaver's stories work for three reasons: (1) They disarm and diffuse audience defensiveness by creating characters with whom the audience can identify and at whom they can laugh. (2) They provide a concrete example for a general, abstract idea (i.e., the virtue of patience). (3) The primary reason the stories can transcend audiences is they appeal to the human emotions which are not only relevant to one group of people, but rather, they transcend race, cultural and political barriers.

The most significant implication of this essay is clear: Narrative/storytelling is one of the most effective means of public speech. Whether in the church, politics or other contexts, a speaker's ability to tell a story will usually influence if not determine his or her effectiveness in connecting with the audience. Effective communicators especially clergy and politicians depend on the use of narratives to communicate with their diverse audiences. This idea has compelling implications for a variety of disciplines and interests: people concerned with public speech, leaders and teachers, pastors and parents, coaches and other communicators.

There are other implications that can be categorized as effective methods of persuasion, culture, Christian preaching and leadership. Cleaver is a masterful communicator in general and a genius at persuading diverse audiences of people. Having served as the catalyst for exponential growth of the St. James United Methodist Church in Kansas City, Missouri for over twenty-five years and two-term mayor of Kansas City as well, and currently a U.S. Congressman, Cleaver, by virtue of his positions, has had to be persuasive in public discourse. Cleaver's effectiveness in persuading audiences can be attributed to his personal humility, dry wit and humor but also his ability to connect with a variety of people in different contexts while still remaining authentic to himself and culture.

As an African American with Southern roots, Cleaver was born and nurtured in a cultural tradition that has used story to entertain, inform, inspire, trick and strengthen relational bonds. While wise preachers and politicians will always use stories, great leaders bring out the best in people. How they function is critical their success. Cleaver's use of storytelling is a testimony to his adaptability. Leaders who are adaptable can juggle multiple demands, but can also magnetize diverse audiences of people in diverse settings. Some stories work better among some audiences. But, the ability to create resonance among an audience or followers is as important to how a leader functions. The greatest leaders are persons who have understood the principle of resonance. Ineffective leaders create dissonance while effective leaders create resonance that produces high morale, motivation and commitment. Storytelling that connects is an act of resonance that fulfills the second tenant of Afrocentric discourse, creating harmony in the midst of chaos. Emanuel Cleaver offers one of many models that fulfill the tenants of Afrocentric discourse.

References

Abouhalkah, Y. (1999, February 7). A legacy of growth and confidence. Kansas City Star, 1L.

Asante, M. K. (1987). The Afrocentric idea. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- Asante, M. K. (1989). Folk poetry in the storytelling tradition. In L. Goss, & M. E. Barnes (Eds.), *Talk that talk: An anthology of African American storytelling* (pp. 491-493). New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Bird, C. S. (1971). Oral art in the Mande. In C. T. Hodge (Ed.), *Papers in Manding* (pp. 15-25). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Boadu, S. O. (1985). African oral artistry. In M. K. Asante, & K. W. Asante (Eds.), African culture: They rhythms of unity (pp. 83-90). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Bowers, D. L. (1995). Afrocentrism in Do the Right Thing. In B. Brummett (Ed.), *Rhetoric of popular culture* (pp. 199-222). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Brummett, B. (1995). Varieties of rhetorical criticism. In B. Brummett (Ed.), *Rhetoric of popular culture* (pp. 110-153). New York: St. Martin's Press.

- Daniel, J. (1974). Introduction. In J. Daniel (Ed.), Black communication: Dimensions of research and instruction (pp. ix-xiv). New York: Speech Communication Association.
- Cleaver, E. (18 July 1996). "Wait for the Lord." Sermon delivered at St. James United Methodist Church. Kansas City, Mo.
- Cleaver, E. (29 September 1996). "There is a God somewhere." Sermon delivered at St. James United Methodist Church. Kansas City, Mo.
- Cleaver, E. (2 February 1997). "Sham battles." Sermon delivered at St. James United Methodist Church. Kansas City, Mo.
- Cleaver, E. (23 January 1998). "A left-handed army." Sermon delivered at Temple B'nai Jehudah.
- Cleaver, E. (23 February 1998). "Stuck up people." Sermon delivered at Metropolitan Baptist Church. Kansas City, Mo.
- Daniel, J., & Smitherman, G. (1976). How I got over: Communication dynamics in the black community. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62, 26-39.
- Davis, G. (1985). I got the word in me and I can sing it, you know: A study of the performed African American sermon. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Diuguid, L. W. (1998, February 7). Cleaver's legacy is untarnished. Kansas City Star, C1.
- Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51, 1-22.
- Foss, S. (1996). *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice* (2nd ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Garner, T. (1994). Oral rhetorical practice in African American culture. In A. Gonzalez, M. Houston,
 & V. Chen (Eds.), Our voices: Essays in culture, ethnicity and communication (pp. 81-91). Los
 Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Co.
- Goody, J. (1992). Oral cultures. In R. Bauman (Ed.), Folklore, cultural performances and popular entertainment: A communications-centered handbook (pp. 12-20). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hamlet, J. (1994). Religious discourse as cultural narrative: A critical analysis of African American sermons. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 18, 11-17.
- Hamlet, J. (1994). Understanding traditional African American preaching. In A. Gonzalez, M. Houston, & V. Chen (Eds.), Our voices: Essays in culture, ethnicity and communication (pp. 100-103). Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Co.
- Hamlet, J. (1998). Understanding African American oratory: Manifestations of Nommo. In J. Hamlet (Ed.), Afrocentric visions: Studies in culture and communication (pp. 89-106). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Harrison, R. D., & Harrison, L. K. (1993). The call from the mountaintop: Call-response and the oratory of Martin Luther King, Jr. In C. Calloway-Thomas, & J. L. Lucaites (Eds.), *Martin*

Luther King, Jr. and the sermonic power of public discourse (pp. 162-178). Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press.

- Jackson, J. M. (1981). The black sermon folk preacher and the chanted sermon: Parallels with West African tradition. In C. Card, J. Cowan, S. C. Helton, C. Rahkonen, & L. K. Sommers (Eds.), A tribute to Alan P. Merriam (pp. 206-222). Bloomington, IN: Ethnomusicology Publication Group.
- Jackson, R.II (1995). Toward an Afrocentric methodology for the critical assessment of rhetoric. In L. Niles (Ed.), African American rhetoric: A reader (pp. 148-157). Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co.
- Johnson, J. W., Hales, T. A., & Belcher, S. (1997). Oral epics from Africa: Vibrant voices from a vast continent. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Knowles-Borishade, A. F. (1991). Paradigm for classical African orature: Instrument for a scientific revolution. Journal of Black Studies, 21, 488-500.
- Kouyate, D. (1989). The role of griot. In L. Goss, & M. E. Barnes (Eds.), Talk that talk: An anthology of African-American storytelling (pp. 179-181). New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Levine, L. (1977). Black culture and black consciousness: Afro-American folk thought from slavery to freedom. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Missouri State Post (1999, February 4). The chamber establishes endowment fund to honor Mayor Cleaver. *Missouri State Post*, A1.
- Mitchell, H. (1990). Celebration and experience in preaching. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Mitchell, H. (1991). Black preaching: The recovery of a powerful art. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Niles, L. (1995). Rhetorical characteristics of traditional black preaching. In L. Niles (Ed.), African American rhetoric: A reader (pp. 79-86). Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co.
- Shaw, L. (1995). Orature: A new perspective in the study of human communication. In L. Niles (Ed.), African American rhetoric: A reader (pp. 117-122). Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co.
- Smith, A. (1972a). Markings of an African concept of rhetoric. In A. Smith (Ed.), Language, communication and rhetoric in Black America (pp. 363-376). New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.
- Smith, A. (1972b). Socio-historical perspectives of Black oratory. In A. Smith (Ed.), Language, communication and rhetoric in Black America (pp. 295-305). New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.
- Smith, J. (1998). Culture, communication and Afrocentrism: Some rhetorical implications of a new world order. In J. Hamlet (Ed.), *Afrocentric visions: Studies in culture and communication* (pp. 107-118). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
- Smitherman, G. (1977). Talkin' and testifyin': The language of black America. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Stallings, J. O. (1988). Telling the story: Evangelism in black churches. Valley Forge: Judson Press.
- Woodyard, J. L. (1995). Locating Asante: Making use of the Afrocentric Idea. In D. Ziegler (Ed.), Molefi Kete Asante and Afrocentricity: In Praise and in Criticism (pp. 27-44). Nashville: James C. Winston Publishing Co.