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SPEAKING IN TONGUES: USING WOMANIST SERMONS AS INTRA-CULTURAL RHETORIC IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT: *This article explores how womanist sermons – produced by womanist theologians who create new texts and analyze existing texts using a womanist hermeneutics that locates and resists multiple oppressions – can be used in the writing classroom with other-literate students to help them produce hybrid discourse that problematizes and expands what is acceptable and progressive rhetoric within the academy. Representing student discussions of womanist sermons and analyzing students' "secular sermons," the article demonstrates how exploring womanist sermons can help non-traditional students create provocative and analytical essays that utilize a much fuller range of their linguistic capabilities.*

Many writing theorists and critical pedagogues question the efficacy and ultimate effectiveness of privileging academic discourse and forcing it upon other-literate students—a term that designates someone who might be treated as an outsider in society, including school, because his or primary language, culture, and perspective are considered non-mainstream. Regarding other-literate students and language acquisition, Marilyn Cooper and Michael Holzman argue that "the particular languages of academic discourse exclude students who come from backgrounds other than young, white middle class American" (205). Keith Gilyard, resisting the academic discourse immersion approach, supports an educational "setting in which teachers genuinely accept [students] as they come and respect them enough not to sell them myths of simple assimilation" (164). Victor Villanueva, also challenging the enculturation of other-literate students into academic discourse, believes that "when we demand a certain language, a certain dialect, and a certain rhetorical manner... we seem to be working counter to the cultural multiplicity that we seek" (183). Patricia Bizzell is another theorist who encourages both cultural and linguistic multiplic-

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ity in the writing classroom, significantly problematizing and refining the relation between academic discourse and the other-literate student. Recently Bizzell has suggested that "it may no longer be necessary to inculcate traditional academic discourse. Rather, what is needed is more help for students in experimenting with discourse forms that mix the academic and non-academic..." ("Basic" 5). Labeling this mixed discourse "hybrid academic discourse," Bizzell is careful to note that while she recognizes academic discourse as fluid and contested, the "constant" of academic discourse is its "privileged social position" (6). Moreover, like Gilyard, Bizzell acknowledges that utilizing hybrid discourse or mastering standard English will not guarantee "school success, economic opportunity and political power" for marginalized or other-literate people (7). Nonetheless, Bizzell champions hybrid discourses because they create opportunities for doing new and exciting intellectual work by offering alternative ways of meaning making. According to Bizzell, these "new discourse forms" are

> openly subjective, incorporating an author's emotions and prejudices, forms that seek to find common ground among opposing positions rather than setting them against one another head to head, forms that deviate from the traditional grapholect by using language that is informal, that includes words from other languages, that employs cultural references from the wide variety of world cultures rather than only the canonical Western tradition, and so on. ("Hybrid" 12)

Like Bizzell, I believe that students should be encouraged to experiment with hybrid discourses because they more accurately reflect the complex linguistic abilities that students—in particular other-literate students—possess. Bizzell makes note of "the profound cultural mixing that has already occurred in the United States" ("Basic" 9), and one site that clearly evidences social, cultural, historical, and linguistic mixing or hybridity is the intra-cultural rhetoric of African Americans.

While inter-cultural rhetoric has gained currency as a field of inquiry in English studies because of proponents of hybridity and contact zone teaching such as Mary Louise Pratt who advocates linguistic communication and acquisition between cultures (64), and Bizzell who sees teaching intercultural rhetoric as a way to solve "the problem of how to build bridges from academic content to the prior knowledge that students from less privileged social groups bring to schools" ("Theories" 3), intra-cultural rhetoric—discourses that people engage in among each other or within their own cultures or communities—might be more fruitful to explore with other-literate students because when using ultra-cultural rhetoric a speaker/writer might employ mainstream or standard language as one of its linguistic options but

he or she would privilege the non-mainstream culture and language of his/her own community. Moreover, speakers and writers of intra-cultural rhetoric have a sociopolitical commitment and aim to educate and empower members of their own cultural or ethnic group. Studying intra-cultural rhetoric demonstrates to other-literate students that people like them employ a variety of linguistic strategies, including standard English, to communicate and achieve goals within society while honoring and utilizing their own cultural capital.

One form of intra-cultural rhetoric that has proven useful with my developmental writing students is womanist sermons. Womanist sermons are created primarily by black women who practice womanist theology, which I have explained elsewhere as a praxis that derives from Alice Walker's womanism and "concerns itself with the faith, survival, and freedom struggle of African-American women" (531). Womanist theologians credit Alice Walker's womanism with inspiring them to construe and construct theology differently because Walker's creed exhorts black women to band together to combat the oppressions they face in society, including those visited upon them by black men and white women (xi-xii).

Like their secular counterparts in the womanist movement, black churchwomen— clergy and laypersons—were faced with discrimination by white men and traditional Christian theologies, by black men and liberation theology, and by white women and feminist theology. Appropriating Walker's womanism, which spoke to the "tridimensional reality of race/sex/class oppression" that many black women faced, black female theologians fashioned a womanist theology that represented their unique positions as theorists and practitioners of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Jacquelyn Grant, who many credit as the first black women to establish a definition of and parameters for "womanist theology" offered this explanation of its function in 1989:

> To accent the difference between Black and White women's perspective in theology, I maintain that Black women scholars should follow Alice Walker by describing our theological activity as "womanist theology." It accents, as Walker says, our being responsible, in charge, outrageous and audacious enough to demand the right to think theologically and to do it independently of both White and Black men and White women. (*White Women's* 209)

In creating a theology that represented black women, womanist theologians formulated a radical biblical hermeneutics—heretofore called womanist hermeneutics—that not only opposed multiple oppressions but also spoke to the lived experiences of African-American women. For example, womanist theologians, examining the Bible

through a black female-centered lens, privilege the story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave who is forced by the patriarch Abraham and his barren wife Sarah to produce a male heir for Abraham. The theologian Delores Williams interprets the Hagar story as revealing "predicaments of poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, rape, motherhood, single-parenting, ethnicity and meetings with God" that represent the reality of many black women (5). Another instance of womanist hermeneutics is challenging the focus on sacrifice and suffering in the journey of Jesus Christ. JoAnne Terrell, for example, advises against strong identification with Jesus' suffering, privileging, instead, Christ's intercession because it "signals the end of the gospel story and the beginning of Christ's significance for us, 'on our behalf'" (125).

A primary source for transmitting womanist hermeneutics is the womanist sermon. In addition to sharing with congregants radical and empowering interpretations of the Bible and reinforcing traditional black sermonic features—emphasis on tone, style, diction, and structure, for example—womanist sermons offer new textual opportunities —in particular written— for exploring appropriation and hybridity. I emphasize written texts because, as McHenry and Heath explain, black sermons have a "strong basis in literate sources," that are often ignored because "their oral performance has received the lion's share of attention from scholars" (419). McHenry and Heath further explain that "[n]umerous written sources—spiritual, political, and rhetorical—produced the skillful and memorable flourishes of the 'literary' that lay scattered within sermons delivered orally" (419). While literate sources are evident in spoken sermons, written sermons allow us to better examine and analyze those sources, revealing the hybridity that is a central feature of the black sermon. Womanist sermons expand and problematize the linguistic, social, and spiritual functions of the traditional black sermon, incorporating not only different English dialects, specific African-influenced linguistic strategies such as call and response and repetition, and traditional rhetorical strategies and structures but also texts and ideas produced by women of all backgrounds that have been historically excluded from sermonic consideration.

As intra-cultural rhetoric, womanist sermons are useful in the writing class because they represent familiar, accessible hybrid linguistic forms that are grounded in other-literate culture but cognizant of the language and culture of the dominant society. Moreover, these sermons offer provocative, liberating, critically conscious arguments and strategies for uplifting black women and other oppressed peoples.

In this paper, I will represent the class discussion of two womanist sermons, and analyze two student essays in response to an assignment linked to the sermons we read. The first sermon the class discussed was "Mary of Bethany: The Best She Could" written by the Reverend

Suzan D. Johnson Cook. The Johnson Cook sermon is found in *Preaching in Two Voices*, a collection of sermons by the pastors Johnson Cook and William D. Watley, in which they alternate preaching eight sermons on the same Bible passages and topics, a structure that illustrates the multiple interpretive quality of the Bible. In her sermon, Johnson Cook explores John 12:1-8, a Bible passage that portrays Mary's anointment of Jesus' feet with costly oils, an act for which she is upbraided by Judas Iscariot, who argues that the oil could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus reprimands Judas and defends Mary, saying, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me" (John 12:1-8). The overall idea or theme that Johnson Cook extracts from the passage is the importance of recognizing and accepting the different gifts that people, in particular women, have to offer.

Johnson Cook introduces her sermon by using the motif of the Sunday family meal, which remains a significant cultural event in many African-American homes. Employing this cultural sign, Johnson Cook goes on to compare a nephew who was silenced at the dinner table by an elderly relative to Mary of Bethany whose generosity was summarily dismissed by Judas Iscariot. Although Johnson Cook employs traditional linguistic strategies such as argument and exemplification, repetition, and metaphor to support her ultimate thesis—that the church should accept, recognize, and reward the contributions of women, in particular female pastors—she also uses non-traditional linguistic strategies such as black cultural awareness and identification, personal reflection, and womanist hermeneutics to produce a hybrid text or discourse that connects deeply and meaningfully with her audience.

The second sermon the class discussed was "Wonderfully Made: Preaching Physical-Self Affirmation," written by Chandra Taylor Smith. In contrast to Johnson Cook's subtle progressions, Smith presents an overtly political sermon that nonetheless includes both traditional and non-traditional approaches to rhetorical meaning-making, including womanist hermeneutics, popular black cultural references, and predominantly black scholarly authorities. Like Johnson Cook, Smith begins the sermon with the Bible passage under review, in her case Psalm 139: 13-14, which reads as follows: "For you created my innermost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." As the title of the sermon suggests, Smith uses the psalm to construct a sermon about the importance of physical self-affirmation for black women. Smith's' sermon addresses the pain black females suffer from being assaulted by mainstream standards of beauty. Smith argues that while God made black women beautiful, the racist society tries to denigrate or deny that beauty: "What is 'in' does not always affirm our natural physical beauty that is of God. The normative Western ideal of

beauty has been historically designed by a racist as well as a sexist standard" (244). Smith's critique of hegemonic Western values serves to remind black women that their ideas of beauty are often imposed from without by a society that feels hatred toward them, a hatred that Smith imbeds in America's social and religious history (245).

In what follows, I will represent the class discussion generated by our reading of the sermons. Then I will explain the formal essay assignment derived from the class exploration of womanist sermons. Finally, I will analyze two students essays produced in response to the sermon assignment.

Class Discussion

We began the discussion of womanist sermons by reading Suzan Johnson Cook's "Mary of Bethany: the Best She Could." I asked the students to read the sermon and write about what rhetorical strategies Johnson Cook was employing. Although we had discussed rhetorical strategies throughout the semester, students were unsure about what I was asking and many of them simply responded to what they liked about the sermon. I took this as an opportunity to connect with the text on the students' level of engagement, so I encouraged them to respond in whatever way they felt comfortable. An African-American female student said that she liked how the pastor talked about her family, in particular the Sunday family meal. "It reminds me of meals I've shared with my own family," the student said. Another student agreed that the beginning of the sermon was evocative of her own family, but she was surprised at Johnson Cook's stance about her nephew. "The minister at my church wouldn't have defended the boy. He would have said that the boy shouldn't have been talking with grown folks." Another students echoed that comment, saying that her parents always taught her that children shouldn't talk around adults and that her church was the same way. A male student asked the class if they thought Johnson Cook was wrong to defend her nephew. A female student asked to hear his opinion, and the male student said that he had always hated to be told to shut up when he was a child. He then remarked, "Isn't womanism about being 'womanish,' and not having to hide how smart you are, even if you are young? Is the boy being fresh or out of line just because he has something to say?" We had talked at length about what Walker meant by "womanish" and most of the class agreed that she was talking about situations just like this one, in which children were silenced merely because they were children, which Walker believed was wrong.

In order to begin helping the students to understand the sermon as rhetoric, I asked them what effect Johnson Cook's personal reflec-

tion about the Sunday meal had on them as the audience. A young Haitian woman said that it made Johnson Cook seem more human to her because she still participated in the Sunday meal, which showed that she cared about family and tradition. Another student seconded this comment, saying that Johnson Cook was both traditional and non-traditional, that she had a non-traditional job for a woman, but she still did some traditional things. An older female student challenged Johnson Cook's narrative about the family meal. First, she said that she didn't believe that Johnson Cook always made or had time to be a part of the meal. Then, she said that her own pastor was always away at a conference or running out after church to do something else. Finally, she said that if Johnson Cook was really such a prominent person then she probably didn't have time to be with her family that often. I took the student's statement as another opportunity to talk about rhetorical strategies. I asked the students to consider that Johnson Cook could not attend the Sunday meal very often, or even that there was no weekly Sunday meal in her family. Why might she write that she did attend the meal and that it was important to her? The older student responded that she believed Johnson Cook wants the audience to see her as both a pastor and a regular woman, so she says that she attends the Sunday meal because she knows people will respect her for that. An African-American male student responded, "it sounds like you're saying that she has to stay in her place.." The older student said, "I guess I am saying that. She is a womanist and all that, but she has to also be their pastor. If her church is anything like mine, then she has a lot to deal with being a woman. A lot of women won't like her acting like she's too big or too busy for the meal."

Several students agreed with this assessment, which allowed me to discuss the family meal scenario as an element of introduction that serves several purposes in the sermon: It reinforces the sermonic theme, establishes the pastor's character or personality, and prepares the audience for unconventional womanist thinking. One student questioned whether Johnson Cook was actually that deliberative in her writing, arguing that pastors were simply "led by the spirit" in their sermons, not purposely constructing a sermon for specific effects. I responded that while traditional black preaching did incorporate spontaneity into its structure, most pastors planned their sermons, producing at the very least a structure or form to follow. I likened this type of preaching to jazz improvisation, by which the players understand the structure of the song but know how to play or improvise within that structure. I further explained that we were reading a written version of Johnson Cook's sermon, which was structured, developed, and revised, perhaps several or more times. While the sermon would change if actually delivered it in front of an audience, Johnson Cook would make

sure that she included her key points and maintained a certain relationship with the audience. I asked the students to read or hear sermons with the understanding that the writers or speakers are making deliberate, conscious choices to produce deliberate, conscious meanings or effects.

After this discussion, students began to locate specific strategies in Johnson Cook's sermon, such as the use of cultural references and the consistent theme of female empowerment. When I asked the class to write about the rhetorical strategies in the next sermon we would discuss, Chandra Taylor Smith's "Wonderfully Made," they seemed much more confident and eager to do that work.

The discussion surrounding the Smith sermon was more focused, but not without controversy or conflict. Many women in the class appreciated Smith's frank discussion of body image, societal standards, and self-love as obedience to God. They understood and appreciated how Smith makes her argument, selecting Bible passages that illustrate God's desire for women to love themselves as they are. They also acknowledged and welcomed Smith's critique of women's magazines, especially her analysis of popular black magazines such as *Essence* and *Ebony*, which Smith argues perpetuate a destructive, white supremacist notion of beauty. One female student complained that the fashion industry promoted the "tall, skinny model-type," which was incompatible with the body types of many non-white women. Another woman argued that even white women didn't look that way, explaining that few women are five-foot-nine and 110 pounds. This comment elicited both laughter and assent as people nodded their heads in agreement. However, one male student sheepishly complained that just because he liked women who looked like models didn't mean that he was brainwashed; rather, he "naturally" liked women that way. After quieting the catcalls that greeted this remark, I asked the student what he meant by being naturally attracted to models. He explained that liking model-type women was merely the way he was, not something influenced by the media or the fashion industry. A Caribbean woman said that in her culture men liked women who were more curvy and "womanly" than American culture. She believed that what you found attractive was culturally grounded. I pointed out to the male student that the tall, thin model as a standard of beauty is a rather recent phenomenon in our society. For centuries, I explained, the Rubenesque woman was the standard of Western beauty. Even as recently as the fifties and early sixties, I continued, voluptuous women such as Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Jayne Mansfield were the epitome of mainstream beauty, and even today there are competing notions of what constitutes beauty, evidenced in, for example, the marketing of the female wrestler Chyna. The idea of beauty as a social construction

was an important topic, central to Smith's sermonic intent. I asked the student to analyze rhetorically how Smith supports or critiques this idea.

Identifying Smith's use of outside sources, a female student pointed to Smith's inclusion of several authorities who analyzed the destructive standards of beauty in America and from where these standards originated. One student noted Smith's use of the work of Joseph R. Washington who "traces the negative images of black people back to the mythology of the 'curse of Ham'" (qtd. in Smith 244). The student found this reference important because it not only illustrated the social construction of beauty or identity but also the dangers of racist biblical interpretations. The same student noted that Smith establishes and supports her argument about socially-constructed, white supremacist concepts of beauty by using a succession of authorities—Washington, Margaret Miles, W.H. Grier, and P.M. Cobb—who all discuss some aspect of racist constructions of the inferior physical qualities of African-Americans. Another student pointed to Smith's interpretation of Psalm 139: 1-14, which Smith reads, unlike other biblical scholars, as a "song of praise and affirmation," not a lament (246). The student admired Smith's ability to use or interpret the Bible passage to serve her own purposes, namely to impress upon the black female audience that "God has made your body, in all of its natural textures, colors, and curves beautiful to behold" (247). This was an important class moment because most of the students had some working knowledge of the Bible and Smith's radical interpretation reinforced the idea that textual meaning, even in a sacred text, is never fixed.

Locating other instances of using source materials as a rhetorical strategy, several students applauded Smith use of Baby Suggs' call for radical self-love in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to support her sermonic theme of positive self-affirmation in the midst of racist attitudes and assumptions. I asked the students to explain why they admired this rhetorical strategy, and a Puerto Rican female replied that most of Smith's audience had at least heard of the book, even if they hadn't read it. Others, she continued, might have seen the movie. She herself knew about the book and movie because Oprah Winfrey devoted an entire show to promoting them. Another student explained that *Beloved* was the type of book that you know you're supposed to admire, even if you don't know anything about it. She too admitted to seeing only the Oprah Winfrey show about the movie, but knew even before then that the book was considered important. She also knew that Toni Morrison was a great writer. A student asked her how she knew Toni Morrison was great if she hadn't read her, to which a young male student responded by saying that "there's a whole lot of white writers like Shakespeare and stuff that a lot of people haven't read, but no-

body questions how great they are." Some of the students laughed, but the student was quite serious. He continued, saying, "some things you just know without actually really knowing because you live in the society. I guess it depends on how something might affect your life whether or not you should find out for yourself or not." We ended the conversation on that note, with my request that students consider seriously the student's idea and to write about what things in society they knew without really knowing and which of those things did they want to experience for themselves.

Formal Assignment

I asked students to write secular sermons in order to help them explore and implement the rhetorical strategies present in sermons without being restricted to religious arguments that would primarily be substantiated by the Bible. Through writing secular sermons, students can employ sermonic forms and strategies to organize and develop their arguments without discussing religious ideas that might impinge on private beliefs and practices. Here is the secular sermon assignment that I gave my students:

> As I believe you have come to understand, womanist sermons are, in essence, expository essays that present a specific idea and endeavor to persuade the audience to its point of view. Womanist sermons employ a radical biblical hermeneutics in order to present ideas important to black women's secular and sacred understanding. For this assignment, I want you to write a "secular sermon," that is, a non-religious text that argues a specific position or claim using the rhetorical strategies found in womanist sermons. For example, you might use outside sources, audience awareness, personal reflection, non-standard dialects, and repetition to present a position or thesis about school vouchers or the images in hip-hop music. You might explore an issue or idea about which the society is talking—Will our involvement in Columbia lead us into another Vietnam? Should euthanasia be legalized?
>
> What you sermonize or "preach" about is up to you. Your only requirements are that you advance an idea or state an opinion, and attempt to use some of the rhetorical strategies that exist in the womanist sermons we discussed in class.

The secular sermon assignment gives students the opportunity

to exercise their own understanding of language and writing, standing upon a platform of knowledge from which to grasp the concepts of traditional and non-traditional rhetoric. Writing their own secular sermons helps students to understand better what they might already know about rhetoric, say, the five-paragraph essay style, and to embrace opportunities for playing with what they already know. Moreover, students might become more aware of and attentive to the audience while writing secular sermons, which will help them to organize and develop their ideas. Overall, the secular sermon assignment offers students a structure that is by nature playful, which allows them to explore their own rhetorical awareness without the burden of institutionally imposed correctness or compliance. Before I discuss and analyze the first student sermon, I want to note that I have masked the identities of the students I present here.

Student Texts

The first secular sermon I will analyze is about gays in the military. The writer, Tony, chooses a controversial topic, as many beginning writers do; however, Tony is able to make this topic meaningful for him by weaving personal reflection, source materials, and opinion throughout the essay, endowing it with insight and relevance beyond the rote "arguable thesis" essay assignment that is a staple of much basic and freshman writing instruction. Here Tony both prepares the audience for his argument and introduces his topic by explaining the societal oppression visited upon gays:

> In my life I have seen injustices. People making false accusations about people they don't even know. They force others to conceal their true feelings. To live a life structured by what other people feel should be the "norm." This is very difficult for many people. You try to hold back a feeling that is enchained in your soul. For many it is the life long struggle between what is the lesser of two evils. One example of this is the idea of living a life with an artificial awareness of oneself. The other is living the life of a homosexual and being chastised and ridiculed by others. This is especially true of the military. Gay men and women have to hide behind a facade of lies.

Tony doesn't explicitly state his thesis in the current-traditional essay sense. Instead, he appeals to the audience's sense of fairness and compassion by discussing the mistreatment of gays in society, and the painful consequences of that treatment. Moreover, Tony shows that

the military mirrors the overall society in which gays are often forced to suffer closeted lives of quiet desperation or open lives of ridicule and abuse. Tony's political stance is supported by his reading of womanist sermons, which encourage the resistance of multiple oppressions in society, including homophobia and heterosexism. Although we did not read a specific sermon challenging homophobia or heterosexism, the sermons we did read all located oppressed groups within society and advocated for their freedom. For example, the Johnson Cook sermon champions the right of children and women to participate fully in society. A sermon we read by Susan Hagood Lee chronicles the struggle of a battered wife to liberate herself from her abusive husband and reject the idea that God ordains women to be subordinate to men. The Taylor Smith sermon resists mainstream images of beauty and embraces the diverse beauty of African-American women. These sermons offer not only a structural but also an epistemological guide for critique, a critique that is often complex and provocative.

We see this complexity and provocation in Tony's refusal to discuss the issue in simple terms. Rather than claiming that being "out" solves a gay person's problems, Tony explains that both closeted and out gays face specific unenviable positions, on which he refuses to place a value judgment. This equivocal stance allows Tony to focus on the more provocative issue: that social climate and conditions, in particular within the military, need to be altered so that all gays can live in peace and freedom.

The next movement of the essay finds Tony using an outside source, " William Eskridege, a renowned legal scholar" to explain why the government might feel "that if you allow gays in the military, you open the doors to a haven of sexual abuse and misbehavior." However, rather than challenging this uniformed fear of homosexual promiscuity in the armed services with another source or his own opinion, Tony uses a long personal reflection to show both that gays are not sexual predators and that the military is unnecessarily and unjustly homophobic:

> In 1995 I was unemployed and I couldn't find a job. My last hope was the armed forces. I had to take my physical with a group of other young men. Everyone was walking around in his skivvies. I was too overwhelmed by everything that I had to go through to even think of my sexuality, until, I had to see the Doctor on a one to one physical.

Later in the narrative, Tony reveals that a sergeant asks him to fill out a form with this question crossed out: "Are you a homosexual or have enacted [engaged] in any homosexual act?" According to Tony,

the sergeant mentions the policy to him then takes "a long pause as though he were waiting for me to tell him something." Although Tony expects entrapment—"They could be using it as a ploy to catch people off guard with the question"—he is sworn in that very day, only to be informed weeks later that he was rejected for testing positive for drugs. Tony doesn't trust the test, however, and concludes that "[s]omething was really wrong. I felt the military was doing something underhanded. I was being singled out. I wear an obvious symbol [pink triangle] of the gay community, a symbol tattooed on persecuted gays during the holocaust. I knew that someone would know that."

The hybrid or heteroglossic nature of Tony's text is influenced by his exposure to womanist sermons, in particular his use of personal reflection to make or undergird a political point or critique. Womanist sermons rely heavily on personal reflection and narrative but always in the service of a critical position. For example, Johnson Cook's "Sunday meal" motif does serve to bring her closer to her congregation, but its larger point is about the unjust silencing of the young nephew, an idea that allows Johnson Cook to later challenge the silencing of women in the church and the greater society. Like Johnson Cook, Tony uses his personal reflection to make a social critique; in his case, we must stop the military's harassment of gays, an idea he develops skillfully in his subsequent paragraphs.

After establishing that the military has a negative attitude toward gays, Tony extends this analysis by discussing briefly an anecdote about a gay soldier then using a gay officer's testimony about military harassment that appeared recently in the New York weekly the *Village Voice*. Tony uses these personal testimonies to substantiate the idea that gays suffer harassment in the military. However, in the next movement of the essay, the solution section, Tony uses a more formal authority, "Dr. Gregory Herek, Ph.D. associate research psychologist at the University of California at Davis and an authority on heterosexuals' attitude toward Gays..." Tony provides some of Dr. Herek's impressive credentials because he understands that he will need a powerful authority to help him convince the audience that gay harassment in the military is wrong and that the situation can and should be changed.

Using authorities to support or advance one's position is a key feature of womanist sermons, and the authorities are selected according to what audience the sermonist is addressing. Taylor Smith, in her sermon, uses many academic authorities because she is trying to impress upon her audience of young women that the damaging mainstream image of beauty is a serious issue not only for them but also within the greater society. Johnson Cook, on the other hand, invokes more familiar and culturally grounded authorities—Spike Lee, for example—because her audience is generationally diverse and her con-

cerns more local—how people treat her and one another within the church. However, both sermonists integrate references skillfully, providing students with accessible models for both locating and incorporating source materials.

In a very effective rhetorical move, Tony develops the solution section of his paper by citing Dr. Herek's testimony before "the House Armed [Services] Committee on May 1999," during which he "proposed five recommendations for implementing a nondiscriminatory policy." Tony quotes Dr. Herek's recommendations to support his contention that gay harassment in the military can be addressed and possibly eradicated:

> (1) Establish clear norms that sexual orientation is irrelevant to performing one's duties and that everyone should be judged on his or her merits. 2) Eliminate false stereotypes about gay men and lesbians through education and sensitivity training for all personnel. ... 5) Take a firm and highly publicized stand that violence against gay personnel is unacceptable and will be punished quickly and severely. Attach added penalties to antigay violence perpetrated by military personnel.

Tony demonstrates that he has control over the sources he uses by responding to the recommendations he cites. For example, after the fifth recommendation about punishing antigay behavior, Tony offers this critique:

> I agree with this statement, but the choice of words is all wrong. I feel that we are all the same. Homosexuals don't need any special treatment. Violence against anybody should be taken seriously. The perpetrators should be punished quickly and severely. It doesn't make a difference the color of your skin or the person you sleep with. What matters is the loyalty to serve and protect the country.

Tony renders a rather sophisticated analysis of Herek's idea in that he is able is to challenge the military's treatment of gays while understanding and respecting the idea of unity that is necessary to maintain a standing army. This type of complex, hybrid thinking—the ability to integrate two seemingly opposing ideas—permeates many womanist sermons. Johnson Cook, for example, is able to embrace family, church, and home, while fighting for liberty for all people, in particular women, within those realms. Taylor Smith is able to embrace the idea of human attractiveness, while challenging and dismantling those mainstream institutions and attitudes that would tell us only one standard of beauty exists. Tony consistently demonstrates integrated

thinking in his essay, creating space both for those who support and oppose gays in the military to find common ground.

Using the rhetorical strategy of repetition, a prominent feature of womanist sermons that we discussed extensively in class, Tony concludes the essay by reinforcing the idea that solving the problem of gays in the military can bring Americans closer together, a socially aware and activist thought that suggests greater unity through embracing difference, a central theme in many womanist sermons:

> Someday ... I hope all of this will be resolved. It takes a lot of work on the part of politicians and us to make this happen. We have to stand up for the rights of all people. This is a country of freedom. This is a country that has a motto of freedom of speech. This is a country with a motto of pursuit of happiness. This is a country that has seen many nations rise and fall. This is a country of United States. So, why can't this be a country of united people?

Tony's repetition of the "This is a country" phrase makes us more aware of the ideas the phrase introduces: "freedom," "freedom of speech," "pursuit of happiness," "many nations," "United States," "united people." Tony also reinforces the idea of unity, and gay people as a part of that unity, by repeating and pairing "United States" with "united people." In fact, throughout this paragraph, Tony skillfully uses repetition to imply that defending "the rights of all people," including gays, is woven into the very fabric of our society. Repetition is a widely discussed feature of womanist (and black) sermons, so I won't revisit those discussions here. However, I will say that both Johnson Cook and Taylor Smith utilize repetition in their sermons and this sermonic feature was intricately explored in the classroom.

Ending his essay with an inviting but demanding appeal, Tony creates a hybrid discourse that utilizes the many rhetorical and critical approaches evident in womanist sermons to argue for the inclusion of gays and other oppressed peoples in the military and the greater society.

The second secular sermon I will analyze, another departure from the traditional essay form, exhibits social awareness and heteroglossic experimentation, including the use of creative writing. Patricia, an older African-American female student who writes fiction, in particular short stories and poetry, wanted to write a serious paper about child abuse that would allow her to use her creative writing skills. She asked me if she could combine creative and critical writing, weaving together a fictional story and research writing. I told her that the approach sounded interesting, but she had to reveal at some point that the story was fictional; and this would take great care and skill. Since we had

read and discussed sermons that privileged the personal, Patricia wanted to use a more personal voice in her paper but with a degree of detachment or safety. Creating a fictional persona helped Patricia to move from the personal or subjective to a more general, objective position within the same text as she discussed the sensitive issue of sexual child abuse.

Like the sermons we read in class, Patricia's essay exhibits rhetorical purpose and audience awareness. Patricia begins the essay with a traditional narrative structure, taking the audience into a specific time in the life of her character, a young African-American boy whom she never names. Here Patricia writes about the first time the character is abused by a family friend:

> Being naive and not knowing what was happening to me, I just cried. He was covering my mouth with his hands so the neighbors wouldn't hear me screaming. After the incident, he told me that if I ever told anyone he would kill me. I was horrified about the fact that this guy told me this in a crude way.

The abuse event comes in the third paragraph of Patricia's essay, after which she interrupts the narrative to discuss the problems of abuse in our society, a discussion that identifies both the severity and prevalence of this crime in our society:

> According to my research, child sexual abuse is more common than what society portrays it to be. One out of five boys will be sexually abuse in the United States by the age of 18. Every child is vulnerable to sexual abuse. Today's parents must face the possibility that someone may hurt or take advantage of their child....Sexually abused children often do not tell anyone about their experiences because they are too young to put into words what has happened....They often feel confused by the attention and feeling accompanying the abuse, are afraid no one will believe them or blame themselves and believe the abuse is a punishment for being bad....

Patricia's essay begins with a powerful narrative but is nicely balanced with the analysis of the problem. As in the sermons we read, Patricia's essay illustrates rhetorical awareness about how an idea can be explored, about what might interest or affect the audience. Like Johnson Cook, Patricia begins with a story, but Patricia's story portrays the very serious consequences of child abuse, which compel us to pay attention to her more conventional use of source materials because we understand that real children undergird the research she presents. Although Patricia does not attribute or incorporate outside

sources as skillfully as Tony, she does select source material entirely relevant to her analysis of the sexual abuse of children. Properly attributing sources is a convention that Patricia will learn in time. What is important here is that she has demonstrates facility with a far more difficult skill—locating and discussing source material that extends or supports her major idea. If a student cannot successful execute this reading/writing task, then correct citation becomes a moot point.

Like Tony, Patricia, influenced by the womanist sermons we analyzed, uses repetition to reinforce the strategy she considers most effective in ending child abuse: parents must listen to or communicate with their children. This idea appears in the narrative section—"I really had no [say about] whom my father invited over"; in the analysis section—"Listening to children is a very important part in helping a child recover from a sexual abuse experience"; in the solution section—"Another approach would be for parents to make children comfortable about speaking their mind"; and in the conclusion—"[Parents] must also create an environment that allows their sons to feel safe talking about sexual abuse or potential abuse they may suffer." Patricia repeats the idea of listening to and not silencing children because in both the narrative and research sections effective communication appears to be the primary preventive approach. In her rhetorical efforts, Patricia is, I believe, supported by her exposure to womanist sermons, which provide her forms for shaping ideas and experiences that are transformative for both herself and the audience.

Influenced by their reading, discussing, and writing about womanist sermons, both Tony and Patricia produce secular sermons that employ linguistic hybridity, critical awareness, integrative intellectualism, and rhetorical maturity. Appropriating rhetorical strategies, social criticism, and heteroglossic experimentation from womanist sermons, students in my developmental writing classes are able to produce critical essays that evidence awareness of audience, research and documentation, traditional and non-traditional supporting detail, and the relationship between personal struggle and social activism. My students benefit from reading, analyzing, and responding to womanist sermons—intra-cultural rhetoric produced by and directed toward people like them—because the sermons situate them at the center of forceful rhetoric, where they are encouraged to use all their linguistic capabilities, including knowledge of standard English, in the service of often radical ideas that are socially, politically, and culturally empowering. Womanist sermons help my students to connect personally with a challenging hybrid discourse that supports their own efforts at discoursing with and within the academy.

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