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“A Different Image, Another Sound: Resistant Rhetoric and Black Identity”

Nhadya Lawes

University of Miami, nsl44@miami.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

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A Different Image, Another Sound: Resistant Rhetoric and Black

Identity

Nhadya Lawes

University of Miami

Abstract

It would be ridiculous to debate the presence of biased and racialized rhetorical structures in United States history and present-day practice. We live in a racialized society: there is not much growth or opportunity there. Yet, the deliberate manipulation of ideas and thought, and the power politics of who does that manipulating is worth consideration. Rhetoric is a weapon of the times; it is also our internal remedy. Rather than face outward for a cure, this project leans into an interior perspective about the beauty and complexity of American Blackness. To do so, my research looks at how and in what ways oppressive rhetoric has been rejected/reclaimed by the U.S. Black community across eras. The first component will look at brief histories of rhetorical oppression towards Black people in the U.S. Past resistance movements such as the Chicago and Harlem Renaissances, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and the Black Arts movements will start the conversation of reclamation and resistance. My exploration of current practices will take a personal approach, as I use written and in-person interviews to look at what informs Blackness for generations living in this time. Ultimately, the project will shed light on interior studies of cultural Blackhood, shifting the conversation of rhetoric and Blackness from one of victimhood to agency and power.

Keywords: Identity, Black Studies, Rhetoric, Media, social Media, Technology, Bias, Socialization, Oppression, Resistance, Culture

Research Foundations

Rhetoric, largely, regards how messages function in our societal systems, and this happens through ways we may not even realize (Brummett, 2006, p.4). Whether verbal, visual, or otherwise, rhetoric is powerful in our present society. It has always been, and continues to be, a site of power struggles and a tool for both oppression and rebellion (Brummett, 2006, p. 37). It would be ridiculous to debate the presence of biased and racialized rhetorical structures in United States history and present-day practice. We live in a racialized society: there is not much growth or opportunity there. What interests me for this project, is the reclamation of rhetorical attitudes toward and for ourselves. This is what I am calling “resistant rhetoric.”

Several books in my personal library inform a lot of where my headspace is and much of what I am still constantly thinking through this research. First, *The Black Poets*, an anthology of Black poetry from its oral traditions to the late 1960s. Released in 1971, this book and a number of poems within it are a lens to the manipulation of words and ideas by Black voices in written form, that foster pride and creativity surrounding Blackhood and create space for interiority among both the writers and the audience. When developing an initial research idea, this book was a spark to the intersections between rhetoric and Black identity. It provides a fair canon of Black poetry from Negro Spirituals through the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement, giving a backdrop to some important moments of Black arts and expression.

Next, Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*. This book is a fictional piece that looks at how rhetoric is used to maintain dignity in the face of dehumanizing opposition. It centers

around the execution of a young man, Jefferson, in Louisiana in the mid to late 1940s. Jefferson is convicted of a crime he did not commit. When a white state attorney refers to him as a "hog" to defend him before the jury, an animal who did not have the intelligence to commit a crime, the journey begins. The persistence of Jefferson's aunt for Grant, a town native and teacher returning from university, to teach Jefferson to be a "man" at his death is a major theme in the novel. She understands that Jefferson cannot die believing himself to be a hog and not a man, not a human being who is worthy. Jefferson's transformation is a symbol to the rest of the Black community in their town as he dies a martyr and a man. It is not only important that he sees himself a man but that the rest of the town recognizes this as well. This story informs my research of rejection in the Black community of a dehumanizing white gaze, and the agency to create a definition for ourselves. Lastly, *If This Is A Man* by Primo Levi, a memoir about the Holocaust. Although this was an author with a non-Black experience, the significance of rhetoric and propaganda in Italy *pre*-Holocaust subtly set the ground for the horrific genocide that followed. It was a key historical context for how simple, yet dangerously effective oppressive rhetoric has been in society, on all fronts.

A Different Image

An important decision in my initial study was my intentional turn away from the external problem to look instead at internal community attitudes and practices towards rhetorical solutions. Hence, with a poem in *The Black Poets*, Dudley Randall's "A Different Image," I embarked to explore what current generations were doing to "create a different image and reanimate the mask" (Randall, 1998, p.142).

Past Movements

To give background and context to this practice of creating “a different image,” I revisited brief histories of rhetorical resistance by Black people in the U.S. Past resistance movements such as the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and the Black Arts movement set the tone for the reclamation Black people are participating in today. In the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance, or the “New Negro Movement,” followed the start of the Great Migration of Black populations from the South to the North, and from rural to urban communities (Hutchinson 2019). It brought about a literary and artistic hub of Black scholarship and production, to remap the Black experience in America. The arts were an important instrument of this remapping of Black personhood: “Through fiction, poetry, essays, music, theatre, sculpture, painting and illustration, participants ... produced work that was both grounded in modernity and an engagement with African-American history, folk culture and memory” (Jordan, 2011, p.848). The Chicago Renaissance saw a similar school of Black creativity, entrepreneurship, and institutions, as migration continued to the Midwest. In the 1950s and 60s, the Civil Rights movement notably presented a national, multicultural effort to end segregation and institutionalized racism, with a focus on legal measures including voting and education. Somewhat synchronic in era, the Black Power and Arts movements had different missions and methods. One looked toward artistic and cultural expression and the other towards community governance and protection. Started by poet Amiri Baraka in New York, the Black Arts movement was a “period of artistic and literary development among Black Americans in the 1960s and early ‘70s” (“Black Arts Movement” 2020). The work of this collective of artists, creators, and intellectuals “challenged oppressive Eurocentric paradigms. [For them,] Liberation and sovereignty did not only mean political or economic independence, but also meant cultural and psychological freedom” (Mack, 2017, p.170). Black freedom was Black pride; Sparked by a

dissatisfaction with how they felt the Civil Rights movement appeased the national mainstream, the Black Power movement "transformed struggles for racial justice by altering notions of identity, citizenship, and democracy" (Joseph, 2009, p.1003). This included community-based practices of self-defense, economic empowerment, and self-instituted social welfare and cultural resources.

Current Resistant Practices

My exploration of current practices took a personal approach, with survey interviews to look at what informs Blackness for generations living in this time. I really wanted to get at what people were digesting and where they were regarding rhetoric and Blackness. Interviews were a great way to gain qualitative insight into how rhetoric functions within the Black community on a personal, individual level.

Methods/Interviews

The methods used for the survey were: Google Forms, NVivo, Grounded Theory, and snowball sampling. Google Forms provided a simple streamline way to send the survey around and collect responses (Lawes, 2019). NVivo is the data analysis software used to code my survey responses and find trends in the research. Grounded theory is the process of asking questions, getting the sample data, and coding the data for the research (Charmaz, 2006). Snowball sampling allowed my participants to share with their networks, and therefore, enlarge my own network for responses. Thus, I do not personally know everyone who submitted a response for this.

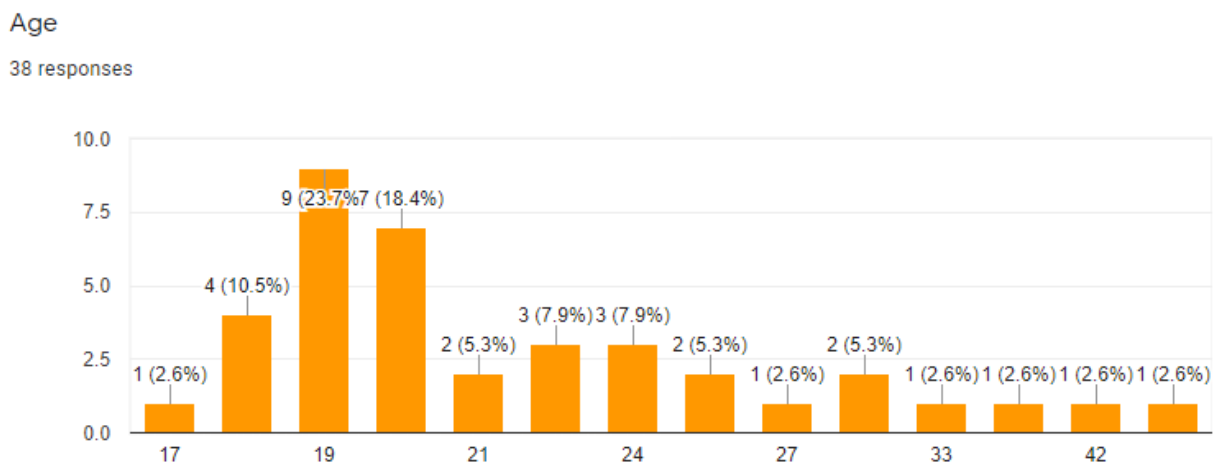
Survey Questions

1. Thinking about the U.S. in particular, what messages did you receive about Blackness while you were growing up? Were these messages positive, negative, or mixed?
2. What informs how you think about Blackness today?

Participants

There were 38 total responses to the survey. All identified racially as Black/African American. About 30% were male and about 70% female. The majority of responses came from college-aged participants between the ages 18-24, also known as Generation Z (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Age Demographics, “To Be Black” Survey



Source: Lawes, Nhadya. “To Be Black” questionnaire. (Google form <https://forms.gle/wUgtsmHc6BzicWn7>, 2019).

Impact

I am grateful for participants who took their time and really sat with these questions. What I’ve read, and what people have actively engaged in their daily lives to rewrite the narrative and “re-animate the mask”, convince me that “resistant rhetoric,” though evolving, is alive and well.

Survey: Qualitative Results

This section analyzes the open-ended responses (Lawes 2019). Key themes from the data include initial feelings of inferiority from society counteracted with self-education and affirmation through various measures, as seen in the span covered by the two questions.

Selected Responses

I have selected a sample of responses to the second survey question, followed by analysis. For the first response, however, I have also included the answer to the first question to highlight the shift in rhetorical attitudes and the influences that created this move.

Response 1:

(Question 1)

Looking back, I would say the messages I received about Blackness were negative. I cannot remember anyone specifically telling me that "Black is bad" but I do remember that I desired to be white and that my image of a criminal was a Black man. At the time I was at a majority white school, and I assume I just wanted to fit in and assimilate to the majority. All of my dolls were white or straight haired; the majority of the media was white or if not, they were Black with more Eurocentric features. In regard to my view on criminality, I remember asking my mother once "Why are all criminals Black men?" because when I would tune in to the local news, I would consistently see a Black man's mugshot. At the time my mother explained to me that is not true and that bad people come in all colors, shapes, and sizes; although, once I got older, she added on that our justice system and societal history also play a role as to why there are a majority of Black men being convicted. Now I understand the underlying reasons why I saw several Black faces on the screen, but as a child it cemented in me the white man's idea that Black men

are a threat. Unfortunately, that belief even sunk into me as a child despite me having a Black father, Black uncles, and other male Black relatives who I adored.

Analysis: The experience of this participant emphasizes the pervasive power of oppressive rhetoric because this person never got a *direct* message about Blackness being bad, but the message was deeply embedded in their mind at a young age.

(Question 2)

Today my view of Blackness is quite the opposite. Today I have such pride, love, and adoration for my people and culture ... We are in the midst of a transformation. Thanks to social media, I have been exposed to so many forms of Black Excellence. It is refreshing to see so many beautiful, creative, established, intelligent, and powerful Black people running this world. This media presence has provided representation for a group of people who undoubtedly have something to say to this world. Being Black is not something to be ashamed of, but rather a source of pride and glory.

Analysis: This participant recognizes a shift in the way they think about Blackness in the second question. The first item they credit this transformation to is social media. It has given them exposure to Black excellence, creativity, wealth, and intellectual thought and transformed their prior notions to that of “pride and glory”.

Response 2:

We do. Black Culture IS CULTURE & We’ve taken back our narrative and tell our own stories through music, art, film, sports, the power of social media (those that use it for good like the dream defenders/Black lives matter) & so on. The new generation of youth are a lot more “woke” & politically aware than mine was growing up. It starts with the

youth/technology and them expressing themselves through all the mediums above I named above that give them a platform to speak out and educate.

Analysis: "We Do." Like I wanted to explore, this participant recognizes this reclamation of the narrative through culture and creativity that I find so beautiful. Across responses for this second question, the trends showed that community, and creativity, culture were huge factors of resistant rhetoric for my participants.

Response 3:

Social media is the main component that has allowed me to realize that my Black is beautiful and my worth as a Black woman in an environment that isn't catered to me. I love to see social media posts where Black women are being uplifted instead of degraded.

Analysis: This participant embraces the counter messages social media provides her, messages that reassure and affirm her Black womanhood in ways other avenues of society do not.

Response 4:

social media tbh just images of Black beauty or a HBCU marching band, things like that is inspiring

Analysis: For this participant, Blackness is informed by social media images of Black, non-Eurocentric beauty and hallmarks of African American culture, such as the band at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU).

Response 5:

Social media, surrounding myself with Black Americans, and self-reflection.

Analysis: This participant cites social media as a premiere factor in their information of Blackness, even before outside community and personal experience.

Response 6:

Black Twitter & interactions with my negroess

Analysis: The specificity of this participants response is interesting to note, as many responses refer to “images” and the Twitter platform is largely text and hashtags (Florini, 2014, p.225).

There is also the direct claim to “Black Twitter”, rather than Twitter itself.

Response 7:

social media is really uplifting and positive when it comes to Blackness and embracing it

Analysis: This participant praises social media as an inspiration to embrace and elevate Blackness in their reality.

NVivo: Quantitative Results

I read through the Google Form responses to recognize immediate trends in the responses. These trends included whether rhetoric was positive, negative, or mixed. They also included where such information was coming from, such as internal communities or outside sources. The nodes I created to track in NVivo were as follows: Beauty, Community (Black family/friends), Dangerous/Negative, History, Mixed, Social Media, and TV/Film. Coverage (how often the NVivo software recorded their occurrences) percentages are as follows: Beauty (4.97%), Community (20.50%), Dangerous/Negative (8.80%), History (10.46%), Mixed (4.97%), Social Media (17.03%), Success (1.76%), and TV/Film, (5.81%).

The two nodes with the highest numbers for positive rhetoric were Community (Fig. 2) and Social Media (Fig. 3). I expected to hear that having Black community and influence would aid in a positive rhetorical atmosphere to reaffirm Black identity. Social media brought a new dimension to the conversation. It is also imperative to note that several responses were coded for

more than one node. Some responses coded for Community described both physical and online communities as well. The terms "code" and "node" are key aspects of conducting research with the NVivo software.

Coding refers to attaching meaning labels to segments of the data (Charmaz, 2006). Through coding, the analyst attempts to explain what is happening in the data. NVivo facilitates this process because it allows for the creation of nodes, which provide storage areas in NVivo for references to coded text (Bazeley, 2007). Therefore, every time we [I] identified a concept from our [my] interview data, a node was created to represent it and the relevant text that pertained to that concept was stored at that node (Hutchison, 2010, p.289).

Figure. 2.

NVivo Node, "Community" Coverage

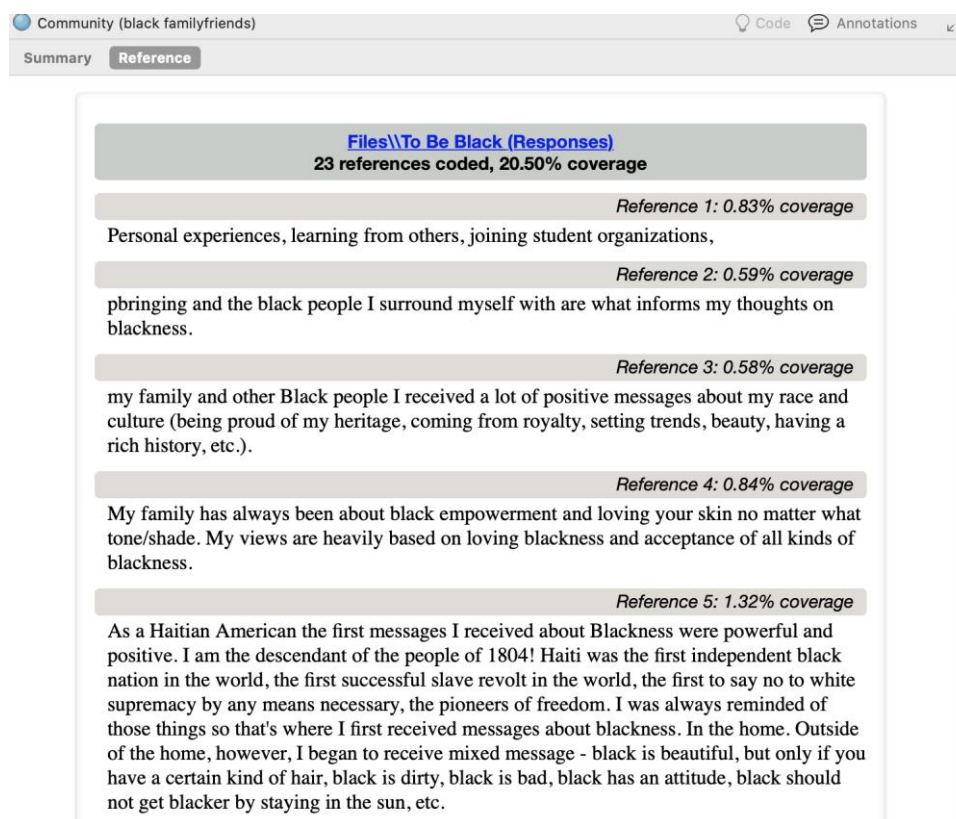
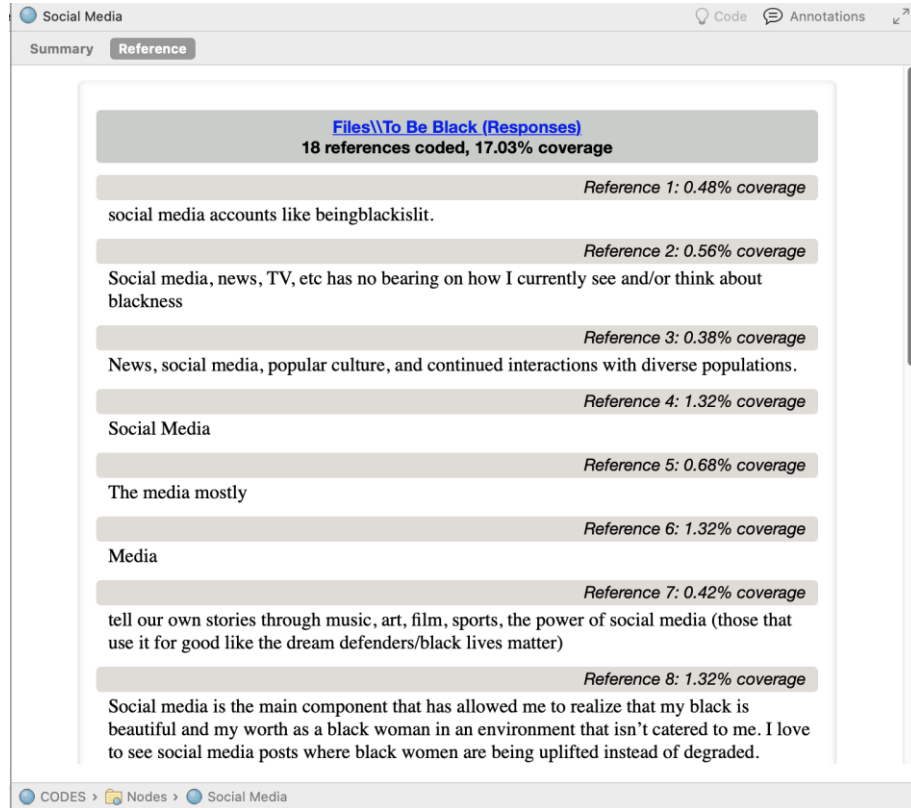


Figure 3.

NVivo Node, “Social Media” Coverage



These are screenshots of what the NVivo software showed me for responses related to community influence and social media.

The NVivo software also generates a word cloud based on repeated terms coded in the responses. I have included the image here (Fig.4).

Figure 4.

NVivo, “To Be Black” Word Cloud

responses. Others are popular pages I have found and use in my own personal pursuit of resistant rhetoric. Like, follow, support, and for research purposes, note the passionate intentionality of the images and messaging they distribute, all forms of the rhetoric we have theorized in this paper.

@dreamdefenders

@becauseofthem

@travelnoire

@blackhistory

@allblackeverything101

@blackexcellencexx

@blackgirlsrock

@blacksuccesstoday

@black.women.are.loved

@imagesyouwontseeontv

@beingblackislit

@blackexistence

@blackamericatube

@blackarchives.co

@melaninjourney

@ablackhistoryofart

@revoltblacknews

@afropunk

@blacklove

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations for this research include scope and time. Scope refers to my audience and the snowball sampling effect. This process could have been strengthened by using a social media profile such as Twitter to gain more responses. However, 38 responses were perfect for the time constraint I was dealing with in completing a two-semester program. If this work were to be continued, I would set up a Twitter account to scale a larger pool. I also did pretty extensive research on creating a digital collection based on the responses I would receive. This would be a space to archive responses as well as a rhetorical mentor of sorts to allow access to future generations to go back to for reference. Current non-social media platforms for digital collections, such as Omeka (Kucsma 2010), proved somewhat outdated and fickle. This would defeat my desire for the collection to be sustainable over time (Hughes 2014), which was an important aspect of creating such an initiative. The bright side lies in my research itself: the

material already exists. It seems to me, then, more effective to highlight currently existing social media pages that do much of what I intended, and in such excellence! Hence, I have provided the curated list of Instagram pages in the previous section.

Although Instagram was a primary focus for social media, another phenomenon to explore in future research is what is known as "Black Twitter." This term refers to Black online space on Twitter, another popular social media platform. It has been a focus, in recent scholarship, for studies in political mobilization (Hill, 2018, p.297) and digital self-making (Florini, 2014, p.225) amongst marginalized populations.

Conclusion

This research allowed both myself and my participants to explore an interior perspective of Blackness, where the emphasis is not on what the outside is doing to us, but how Black people as an in-group are empowering themselves as a response or even independent to all of that. The influence of various factors, as shown in the NVivo coding, is creating resistant space for Black subjects across generations to claim cultural and rhetorical autonomy over expression of self. In this age, online spaces, in particular, have contributed to this agency. They are taking the task handed to us in Randall's poem to create *a different image*, and social media has been this powerful outlet to do so.

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