Collaboration, Collaborative Communities, and Black Folk Culture

Keith D. Miller and Elizabeth A. Vander Lei

In recent years Kenneth Bruffee, Karen Burke LeFevre, Anne Gere, Peter Elbow, and other leading composition theorists have promoted the theory, history, and methods of collaborative learning and collaborative writing. Through their efforts, peer editing and other forms of collaboration have become important components of composition theory and instruction at all levels. In addition, John Trimbur and James Zebroski have schooled us to accept a more radically social, Vygotskyan conception of language development in place of Piaget's more solitary model. While these developments are all salutary, this view of collaboration is flawed because Bruffee (and the thinkers he cites), LeFevre, Gere, Elbow, and others have erected models of collaboration that virtually ignore minority cultures and much minority writing.[1]

For black America this omission is especially perilous because to ignore black folk culture is to bypass its effective, time-honored procedures for oral exchanges among collaborators. African-American folk culture offers an interactive system of oral collaboration that has ably served such rhetors as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson and that can serve our composition students as well.

After offering a brief background on collaboration in black folk culture, we examine three of its major strategies of oral communication: communal collaboration, call-and-response collaboration, and historical collaboration. Each strategy originated and matured in black oral culture and operated in the integrated community of the civil rights movement; each can become a valuable component of composition classrooms.

Collaboration in Black Folk Culture

Black culture has always been highly interactive in both sacred and secular contexts. Rhetorical interplay characterized the work songs of slavery, animates the dynamics of folk preaching, and endures in street games such as playing the dozens. These exchanges enact what Geneva Smitherman calls "the traditional African world view," which asserts a "fundamental unity" of the spiritual and the material. Smitherman writes:

> Harmony in nature and the universe is provided by the complementary, inter-
> dependent, synergistic interaction . . . communities of people are modeled after
> the interdependent rhythms of the universe. . . . Balance in the community, as
> in the universe, consists of maintaining these interdependent relationships. (75)

In some forms of black oral interaction, the author collaborates not merely
with another writer but with the audience of the discourse; as a result, the role
of author blurs with the role of audience. Both author and audience create the
work and are responsible for its success, for, in Leonard Doob's words, "there
is no sharp line between performers or communications and the audience, for
virtually everyone is performing and everyone is listening" (qtd. in Smitherman
108). This author-audience interchange occurs in at least three particular forms.
In communal collaboration the roles of author and audience are completely
indistinct. In call-and-response collaboration the roles of author and audience
remain distinct, and participation in each of these roles is limited to those
present. In historical collaboration the roles of author and audience remain
distinct, but participation in the roles is extended to those who preceded and
those who will follow the current author and audience. Each of these forms of
author-audience collaboration can apply to composition classrooms.

Communal Collaboration

In communal collaboration, the author and the audience meld into one. The
distinction between author and audience disappears because the attention of
the community focuses on the content of the discourse, not the persons creating
and listening to it.

During Slavery

With the entire community acting as both audience and author, black communal
collaboration began on American shores with the composition of spirituals. As
both slaves and white observers have explained, many spirituals were initially
composed through a collaborative process of spontaneous, synergistic exchanges.
Natalie Burlin elucidates this process:

> Minutes passed, long minutes of strange intensity. The mutterings . . . grew louder,
> more dramatic, till suddenly I felt the creative thrill dart through the people like
> an electric vibration . . . and then . . . came a "moan," sobbed in musical cadence.
> From somewhere in that bowed gathering another voice improvised a response
> . . . then other voices joined in the answer, shaping it into a musical phrase; and
> so . . . from this molten metal of music a new song was smithied out, composed
> then and there by no one in particular and by everyone in general.   (qtd. in
> Levine 159)

Clifton Furness portrays a group of slaves in another state engaged in a similar experience:

> Gradually moaning became audible in the shadowy corners where the women sat. . . . A rhythm was born, almost without reference to the words that were being spoken by the preacher. It seemed to take shape almost visibly and grow. I was gripped with the feeling of a mass-intelligence, a self-conscious entity gradually informing the crowd and taking possession of every mind there, including my own.
>
> . . . .
>
> A black man began to exclaim: "Git right—sodger! Git right—sodger! Git right—wit Gawd!"
>
> . . . .
>
> Instantly the crowd took it up, moulding a melody out of half-formed familiar phrases. . . . A distinct melodic outline became more and more prominent. . . . Scraps of other words and tunes were flung into the medley of sound by individual singers from time to time, but the general trend was carried on by a deep undercurrent, which . . . bore the mass of improvised harmony and rhythms into the most effective climax of incremental repetition that I have ever heard. I felt as if some conscious plan or purpose were carrying us along, call it mob-mind, communal composition, or what you will.   (qtd. in Levine 159–60)

Clearly, spirituals are, in Lawrence Levine's words, "product[s] of an improvisational communal consciousness" (160). Because spirituals developed communally, their language was shared by everyone and owned by no one; all distinctions between author and audience blurred during the original moment of composition.

During the Civil Rights Era

More recently, communal collaboration generated the civil rights songs that, in King's words, formed "the soul of the movement" (*Why* 61). Analyzing civil rights lyrics, Pete Seeger describes their typical composition:

> What it is—one person gets an idea for a song—usually borrowing an old tune —changing around the words, and then if it's a good idea, it'll be picked up by others and new verses added to it . . . until after a while you naturally can't say who composed the song.   (*WNEW's Story*)[2]

Interacting as equals, singers merge the roles of author and audience while shaping both tunes and lyrics.

Len Chandler explains the revision of "Which Side Are You On?" His original lyrics were:

> Come all you bourgeois black men
> With all your excess fat

> A few days in the county jail
> Will sure get rid of that.   (*WNEW's Story*)

On a march he heard a teenager sing:

> Come on all you people
> Worried about fat.
> A day of Route 80
> Will take care of that.   (*WNEW's Story*)

Chandler notes, "And I asked the kid that I heard do that . . . one of the kids on the march, where'd he get that verse . . . and he said, 'I don't know—I heard it somewhere and I don't know where it came from' " (*WNEW's Story*). In this collaborative effort, the community as a whole, rather than one identified person, altered the lyrics to fit a current circumstance. Providing a description of civil rights marchers performing communal collaboration, Seeger recalls,

> A picture I'll always keep in my mind . . . was after a day of marching . . . there was a gang of 50 young ones . . . waiting for supper. And singing at the top of their lungs. . . . and just making up verse after verse. If the spirit was real good, why a song could go on for five or ten minutes. Just as long as somebody could think of some verses for it."   (*WNEW's Story*)

These young activists acted as a community, creating verse after verse for each other. In this type of collaboration, no one can claim ownership or authorship because the community functions as both composer and audience.

Call-and-Response Collaboration

In call-and-response collaboration the roles of leader and audience remain distinct. However, the audience collaborates with the leader through discrete oral exchanges, causing the leader to adjust the arrangement, the delivery, and even the content of the discourse. Through this intensive communication the audience participates as coauthor.

In Sermons and Songs

This species of collaboration occurs throughout African-American folk culture, most notably in folk sermons. In *The Art of the American Folk Preacher*, Bruce Rosenberg comments that audience participation affects both the length and the quality of the sermon (104). As churchgoers offer verbal encouragement, preachers orchestrate their cadences to allow for congregational participation and then shift the homiletic content to reflect the churchgoers' responses to the developing sermons. Rosenberg describes two of Reverend Rubin Lacy's performances of the sermon "The Twenty-third Psalm"; in the first Lacy included

an unusual illustration that he omitted from the second performance. Rosenberg attributes this change to the differing responses of Lacy's audiences (146).

The songs enlivening these worship services also exhibit call-and-response collaboration; as worship leaders initiate or "line out" the verses of a hymn, the congregation responds by repeating the verses or by creating its own lyrics (Rosenberg 16). Analyzing call-and-response collaboration, Smitherman classifies audience reaction into five categories: cosigning or agreeing with the speaker, encouraging the speaker, repeating the speaker's words, completing the speaker's statement, and acting "on T," powerfully acknowledging the truth of the speaker's words (107). Using several of these strategies while maintaining the role as audience, a congregation can effectively coauthor a sermon with its preacher and coauthor religious lyrics with its song leader.

In Civil Rights Lyrics and Oratory

Call-and-response collaboration shaped civil rights music. For certain songs the leader would call out a short verse and the audience would reply with a refrain. The volume and the enthusiasm of the refrain indicated to the leader the popular and unpopular topics for verses. An unnamed civil rights chant displays this call-and-response format:

LEADER: Pick 'em up and lay 'em down.
GROUP: Right. Right.
LEADER: Pick 'em up and lay 'em down.
GROUP: Right. Right.
LEADER: Pick 'em up and lay 'em down.
GROUP: Right. Right.
LEADER: All the way to Selma town.
GROUP: Right. Right.
LEADER: Oh, the mud sure was deep.
GROUP: Right. Right.
LEADER: Oh, the hills sure was steep.
GROUP: Right. Right.   (*WNEW's Story*)

At times an audience directly aided the song leader in composing verses. Chandler accounts for the formation of one verse of this modified military drill cadence:

There was a guy named Jim Letherer who had one leg. He said, "Make up a verse about me." And so I said:

LEADER: Jim Letherer's leg got left.
GROUP: Right. Right.
LEADER: But he's still in the fight.
GROUP: Right. Right.

LEADER: He's been walkin' day and night.
GROUP: Right. Right.
LEADER: Jim's left leg is all right.
GROUP: Right. Right.   (*WNEW's Story*)

As the Jim Letherer example illustrates, in call-and-response collaboration, direct intervention, as well as audience interest, can provide fuel for the engine of invention.

Call-and-response interplay also contributed to the oratory of King and other civil rights leaders. Especially when addressing primarily black audiences, King collaborated with his listeners through the call-and-response dynamic of the folk pulpit, arranging his rhythms to encourage audience responses and answering those responses. For example, in "I Have a Dream" he extemporaneously concluded with the famous "Let freedom ring" peroration. In an interview after the speech, King explained his spontaneity, "I started out reading the speech . . . just all of a sudden—the audience response was wonderful that day—and all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used . . . and I wanted to use it here" (Garrow 283). King emphasized that the enthusiasm of his hearers influenced the content of his discourse and propelled him to add a rapturous and fitting conclusion to one of the best speeches of the century.

Historical Collaboration

Historical collaboration enables the contemporary author and audience to respond not only to each other but also to previous speakers and audiences from the same or different regions. As African-American folk culture carries discourse through time, orators and audiences refine the work of their predecessors by adapting it to contemporary experience. Both communal collaboration and call-and-response collaboration work within the framework of historical collaboration, much as the weft of a fabric operates within the threads of the warp.

In Sermons

Worshipers' responses to folk sermons influence the survival of illustrations, anaphoric series, and entire sermons. Several sermons still heard in churches and on the radio were delivered as early as the 1860s. For example, at least two sermons—"Dry Bones in the Valley" and "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest"—have been preached during slavery and proclaimed from black pulpits ever since. These widespread and highly durable sermons have been recorded and published numerous times by numerous preachers.[3] Ministers repreach these and other sermons and portions of sermons, eliciting the verbal approval of their congregations while deleting material that fails to spark any interest. Thus, as churchgoers engage in call and response, they not only shape the immediate content of a sermon but also determine its longevity.

In Civil Rights Lyrics and Oratory

"We Shall Overcome," the quintessential civil rights anthem, evolved through collaboration that lasted several decades. Begun before the turn of the century as a hymn called "I'll Be All Right," the song shifted to "I Will Overcome" when the Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Workers Union of Charleston, South Carolina, adopted it as their anthem in the 1940s (Reagon 70–73). During a strike in 1945–46, workers emphasized union solidarity by changing "I Will Overcome" to "We Will Overcome" (Reagon 73–75).

Another metamorphosis occurred when members of the Charleston union sang "We Will Overcome" at the Highlander Folk Center in Tennessee. Highlander's Zilphia Horton reworked the hymn-turned-labor-song and included it in Highlander's music program (Reagon 76–77). Pete Seeger learned it from Horton, changed "We Will" to "We Shall," and composed the verses "The whole wide world around" and "We'll walk hand in hand" (Reagon 77–78). In 1959 police raided Highlander, took names, turned off the lights where people had congregated, and rummaged through the building. Sitting in the dark, Mary Ethel Dozier, a high school student, contributed a new verse, "We are not afraid," which, like Seeger's lyrics, became a lasting contribution to "We Shall Overcome."[4] Historical collaboration enabled singers of this tune to wed the authority of a religious tradition and a labor struggle to their own crusade for civil rights.

Displaying a highly fluid and intertextual sense of discourse, King also engaged in historical collaboration. He frequently repeated sermons and speeches, weaving old and new material together for "I Have a Dream" and practically all his other addresses. Like other masters of the black folk pulpit, he repeated passages that were well received by listeners (such as the "Let freedom ring" peroration, which he first used seven years before "I Have a Dream") and dropped those that met with silence.[5] He carried this technique into his writing as well; discourse lauded by his listeners spilled over into "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and virtually all his other essays, columns, and books.

Like King, Jesse Jackson uses historical collaboration, a practice that has confounded white critics unfamiliar with the historical collaboration of black folk culture. While campaigning for the presidency in 1988, Jackson and his audiences honed various themes that later emerged in his address to the Democratic convention in Atlanta, Georgia. Remarking on Jackson's method of composition, columnist William Safire derided Jackson's convention oration as a collection of "Jesse's Greatest Hits," including "I Understand" and "Your Patch Isn't Big Enough"—a criticism that could just as easily be applied to "I Have a Dream," "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and almost any of King's other addresses and treatises. What Safire cannot explain is why the method of composition he ridicules generates rhetoric far more memorable than that produced by the traditional methods of composition used by many other national politicians.

Implications for Teaching Composition

What are the implications of black oral culture for our teaching? Fundamentally, we must acknowledge that black folk communication can teach us something new about collaborative learning and collaborative writing. Once we accept the idea that African-American orality offers resources for literacy, we can develop a new heuristic that offers more effective classroom strategies. In this effort we must rely on students and faculty who have participated in the black folk community.

To use this new collaborative heuristic, we must heighten our sense of language as fluid, interactive, and intertextual. The collaborative system of black folk culture insists on more than one method of collaboration and insists on an analysis of the rhetorical situation to determine the appropriate method. Furthermore, the three collaborative strategies often work together within the same discourse. Many of the applications of this system require further study, but we offer some recommendations.

First, we can recognize the parallels between communal collaboration and group brainstorming. As in communal collaboration, group brainstorming can involve numerous participants composing on a roughly equal basis. Likewise, we can understand the parallels between call-and-response collaboration and peer editing; like call-and-response collaboration peer editing involves audience participation in a process largely directed by one person, either the call-and-response leader or the writer.

Second, we can broaden the range of our collaboration. Too often, we constrain collaborative invention to group brainstorming and collaborative revision to small-group peer editing. By screening a paper on an overhead projector, a teacher can promote collaborative revision through group analysis of the paper; call-and-response collaboration can work as a variation of group brainstorming.

Third, throughout the composition process we can heighten the intensity of our collaboration by using more than one collaborative strategy at a given stage of the composing process. A call-and-response-invention assignment after a communal-invention session both heightens and refines the student's inventive abilities.

Finally, we can use historical collaboration to assist students in locating themselves within an ongoing debate. Our students can use historical collaboration as they assimilate, subordinate, and identify other voices while adding their own words to a stream of language about a particular topic. Too often, we identify historical collaboration with plagiarism and, therefore, expel a productive collaborative strategy along with its negative counterpart. Without practicing plagiarism, our students can use historical collaboration to draw the power of past discourse into their prose.

In the face of Western culture's ideological enshrinement of the isolated author, black folk culture has preserved and refined its collaborative strategies

through spirituals and sermons and has offered these strategies to American society through the songs and speeches of the civil rights movement. These procedures from a minority voice need to become the procedures of the majority voice as well. If we reject the ideology of solitary authorship, perhaps our students can learn to write speeches as powerful as "I Have a Dream" and can create rhetorical music as joyful as a spiritual while they smithy new songs from a molten metal of interactive discourse.

NOTES

[1]Gere, however, is currently studying collaboration among certain black female writers. The omission of black oral culture from models of collaboration may reflect a general conception of orality. Trained by Walter Ong, the early Jack Goody (especially his essay coauthored with Ian Watt), and others, composition theorists often conceive of orality as a sensibility that sharply contrasts with literacy. Even Mina Shaughnessy tended to look at oral culture as the source of obstacles to literacy. Despite the efforts of Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, Amy Shuman, and Shirley Brice Heath, many still see orality and literacy as disparate sensibilities (see, e.g., Farrell; Gilbert). While we do not deny that oral cultures present some obstacles to literacy, we claim that professionals make a serious mistake in studying oral cultures primarily to learn the obstacles they pose to literacy. Those who maintain that black orality inherently presents significant opposition to literacy cannot explain how Ned Cobb, an entirely illiterate Alabama farmer, could dictate an autobiography as eloquent and as valuable as any ever written in this country (see Rosengarten).

[2]This quotation and all other *WNEW's Story of Selma* quotations are used with the permission of Folkways Records and Rounder Records.

[3]For the origins of these sermons during slavery, see Lyell 135–36 and Levine 158. For "Dry Bones in the Valley," see Rosenberg 28; Cleveland, "Dry Bones in the Valley"; Franklin, "Dry Bones in the Valley"; and "Dry Bones." For "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest," see Rosenberg 28; Franklin, "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest"; and Cleveland, "The Eagle Stirring Her Nest." Versions of these sermons appear in Davis 136–42 and Rosenberg 155–62, 200–08.

[4]See Reagon 81–82 and *MIA Newsletter*. Produced by King's Montgomery Improvement Association, the *Newsletter* carried a firsthand, anonymous description of the events at Highlander when Dozier composed the verse "We are not afraid."

[5]Compare the "Let freedom ring" perorations at the conclusions of King's 1956 annual address and his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech.

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