

**Carey, Tamika L. *Rhetorical Healing: The
Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood.*
State University of New York P, 2016. 212
pages.**

Elaine B. Richardson

Tamika Carey's important and innovative book examines and critiques wellness campaigns directed towards Black women throughout the last twenty-five years as forms of rhetorical action and education. She develops this claim in the introduction of the book to conceptualize the rise of African American self-help culture since the nineties. To ground it, she draws from Thomas Miller's (2004) concept of the literacy campaign and expands it to include reactionary pedagogical projects cultural groups use to address ideological shifts and knowledge breakdowns.

To carry out this project, she enlists work from the fields of Literacy Studies, Black Feminisms, Writing Studies, Genre Studies, Feminist Rhetorics, and African American Rhetorics, which includes Black Studies, Rhetoric, Communication, History, Literature, Media Studies, and more. The book provides case studies of the most influential voices in discussions of Black women's well-being and recovery that have sustained this self-help culture. Among these voices are mega church minister TD Jakes, comedian and talk show host Steve Harvey, self-help author and television host Iyanla Vanzant, and playwright and filmmaker Tyler Perry. Carey wisely focuses on the wellness campaigns of these figures because of their popularity among Black women and because they have received scant attention within scholarship on rhetoric or literacy practices despite the obvious forms of public pedagogy running throughout their books, instructional manuals, and films. She traces the cultural messages and performances these writers use to attract Black women and teach them their ways to wellness.

Carey's usage of the concept of the campaign to group and assess these efforts leads her to arrive at and present similar findings and a similar argument about the conservative learning agendas marketed to Black women in the name of wellness. This is one of the book's key arguments. As she explains in the conclusion, the overwhelming similarities in how writers have conceptualized problems affecting Black women in the wake of second-wave feminist movement of the seventies and deployed persuasive strategies and

literacy curricula require us to make media literacy through rhetorical criticism a concerted goal within studies of African American rhetorics, cultural rhetorics at large, literacy studies, and beyond. By grounding the practice of rhetorical healing as a genre process, Carey presents us with an accessible and nuanced contribution to the story of Black women's literacy and she convincingly argues that this facet of Black women's self-help culture since the nineties has operated as a conservative and, at times, anti-feminist process of rhetorical reeducation.

These interventions alone are significant, but what I suspect will ensure the uptake of her book among transdisciplinary scholars is *Rhetorical Healing's* interdisciplinary framing and its transparent analytical method. Since we all know that introductions are challenging to write, the ease with which Carey walks her readers through the critical scholarship on the role of spirituality and self-help on the Oprah Winfrey show and network, and her clearing of the ground to interrogate the media icon's influence on Black women, all while acknowledging the rich literacy history of this group, is no easy feat. Carey makes this achievement, without short-changing psychoanalytic, literacy, and feminist perspectives on Winfrey's media empire, or pretending as though rhetoricians such as Dana Cloud have not already addressed the complexities of neoliberal self-help culture. What Carey does so well from the outset of this book is to define African American rhetorics as an "action-taking, knowledge-making, and community-sustaining tradition" (146).

She also declares her goal of making Black women the beneficiaries of rhetorical scholarship, all while acknowledging the agency they exert in supporting complex projects like self-help that are thought to advance African American communities. This goal is what makes the first two chapters of the book so important and enriching. Scholars such as Geneva Smitherman, Keith Gilyard, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Gwendolyn Pough, Vorris Nunley, David Holmes, and the author of this review have all theorized African American or Black women's rhetorics within literature and prose. Carey continues this work in chapter one, "Are You Sure You Want to Be Well," by tracing healing discussions in the work of writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Audre Lorde, as she situates the Black women's literary renaissance and the evolution of Black feminist thought as literacy crises that required African American writers to respond. I found Carey's discussion of the New Orleans, Louisiana healing conjurer and Voodoo Priestess Marie Laveau in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* particularly illuminating of African diasporic epistemologies and spiritual power practices. Carey writes:

Hurston offers a better indicator of the healing conjurer's day-to-day role within her respective communities through the account of a woman who approached Laveau seeking help with an "enemy" who had "tried [her]" and convinced her "loved ones" to leave her. According to Hurston's [1935] interviewee, by the time the woman finished her plea for help, Laveau had transformed herself and was "no longer" a woman "but a god" [p. 95]. Much to the woman's relief, Laveau responded, "Oh, my daughter, I have heard your woes and your pains and tribulations, and in the depth of the wisdom of the gods I will help you find peace and happiness" [p.95]. Part spiritual conduit, part social worker of sorts, Laveau exemplifies one of the appeals of the healing conjurer among African Americans in this example. With their ability to tap into otherworldly resources, healers held the capacity to challenge forms of systemic authority and remedy cultural as well as material wounds. In this respect, healing conjurers posed a threat to the institution of slavery in antebellum America by offering African Americans another measure of agency in their social lives, and they provided a measure of balance within the interior lives of Black communities. (18)

This is an example of Carey's recuperation of literary and feminist history and locating it within African American cultural literacy traditions. That she follows this first chapter with one of the only guided discussions of how to undertake an analysis and feminist critique of African American rhetorics in print in "I Need You to Survive: Theorizing Rhetorical Healing" demonstrates Carey's expertise as a teaching scholar who develops incisive critical frames for analyzing texts and movements and then advises others on how and why they must adopt these methods. Readers of *Rhetorical Healing* will not only walk away with a greater understanding of African American rhetorical traditions and literacy practices, but they will also have a model and working heuristic for how to identify these efforts and measure their consequences in ways that benefit groups such as Black women.

Carey's chapter three, "I'll Teach You to See Again: The Rhetoric of Revision in Iyanla Vanzant's Self-Help Franchise," overviews the rhetoric of Vanzant's oeuvre, from her early books to her series "Fix My Life" on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN). Carey underscores the ways that Vanzant creates urgency in the call for Black women's healing, connecting Black women's wellness to the health of the Black community, echoing the work of Anna Julia Cooper, the Black woman intellectual and freedom fighter active in the late 19th and mid 20th Centuries. Vanzant's work to reeducate Black women is also linked to empowerment through Afrocentric epistemologies of thinkers such as Cooper's contemporary, W. E. B. DuBois, the brilliant sociologist, writer and activist,

in its espousal of a worldview to challenge white domination. In looking at Vanzant's early work, Carey uncovers the numerous rhetorical healing tasks she undertook which authenticated and authorized her among Black women. Vanzant made compelling "enough argument[s] for healing [which] required her to engage in rhetorical acts of explication and redefinition, create contexts of lack, and reinvent her ethos at each stage in the development of her wellness campaign. To her credit, the arguments she makes invoke the semblance of Black women's resistance traditions and reflect how these themes and topics appear within contemporary Black women's writing and rhetorical practices" (65). Though Vanzant employs counterlinguistic and rhetorical practices that appeal to her audience, Carey finds "the state wellness her curricula promote falls short of cultivating in Black women the rich legacy of critical social political engagement with the public that the rhetorical themes she uses symbolized" (52). At the end of the day, Vanzant's wellness campaign, in its commodification, homogenizes the experiences of Black women as perpetual students who must continually work on themselves to negotiate their lives in this unchangeable world of internalized gender oppression.

In chapter four, "Come Ye Disconsolate: The Rhetoric of Transformation in T. D. Jakes's Ministry," Carey continues to contextualize her case studies in histories of Black self-help traditions. Here she overviews the traditional Black church and its shifts in various eras of the Black experience to give context to T. D. Jakes' work. Carey shows through critical feminist rhetorical analysis of Jakes' arguments in *Woman Thou Art Loosed* and *Daddy Loves His Girls* that, though Bishop Jakes wants his outreach to Black women to make an "impact on the secular world," he employs "problematic construction[s] of Black womanhood" (91)—for example, Black women's "immorality," emotional infirmities, selflessness, or gender essentialization—that implicate longstanding issues in theology, the Black church, and the dominant society, and render problematic his transformative rhetoric for healing.

Chapter five, "Take Your Place: The Rhetoric of Return in Tyler Perry's Films," lays out the process of rhetorical healing that the playwright Tyler Perry has used to make his films appealing to African American Christians. Here Carey unearths a disturbing message about women returning home and a corresponding literacy curriculum in his films. The analysis is sharp and her argument that Perry's films contain an anti-feminist pedagogy is provocative. Carey positions Perry's films at the intersections of African American vernacular culture and the tensions African American writers face bringing Black-female-centered narratives to the public. She makes this move to trace the cultural messages circulating in his films and the rhetorical consequence of his choice to stage an intervention into the supposed plight of the Black family within narratives of Black women's move from heartbreak to recovery.

The sixth chapter, the book's conclusion, "With Vision and Voice: Black Women's Rhetorical Healing in Everyday Use," asks "[H]ow can we put projects such as Black women's healing into everyday, critical use? Given that popular public pedagogical venues such as *Essence Magazine* have shifted in their function as spaces for radical thought, reformed womanizers such as Steve Harvey are presented to Black women as relationship experts who can teach the skills of "acting like ladies," "thinking like men," and "how to find, keep and understand a man" to achieve equitable futures. Carey makes a strong appeal to academicians, especially rhetoric and composition experts, to broaden their pedagogies and interrogate privilege, and she argues that a critical turn must occur if we are to make these literacy campaigns useful for the healing of Black women in everyday life. We must help students to become rhetorical critics. Carey asserts:

Even if instructors of writing, women and gender studies, or African American studies do not go so far as to read and teach specific genres such as Black women's self-help books or watch and interrogate gospel stage plays, teaching students to identify campaigns and track their functions across multiple forms of media is a generative exercise in research, analysis and criticism. (150)

Carey implores us to help students ask hard questions, such as what are the ends of a campaign and who is empowered by it? Students should also be encouraged to identify homogenized, non-intersectional approaches. Going even further Carey shares her own teaching struggles in working with students to have or maintain empathy or to deal with shame when reading women's memoirs such as *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life* by me, Elaine Richardson; Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*; Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*; and Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. Carey discusses her pedagogical tasks and how she employed Vivian Gornick's "The Situation and the Story" to help students identify the personal and political functions of the works, the conventions of the genre, and craft of memoir, among other strategies. She discusses her careful planning of her course, which should have set students up to read my book as a critical memoir. However, though the students, especially the students of color, engaged and identified with early chapters about my childhood growing up in a poor Black urban neighborhood, even showing empathy with my childhood rape and abortion, the formerly talkative women of color silenced themselves in later chapters and couldn't identify with my experiences when I chose to stay with my abusive pimp(s). Carey thinks deeply and carefully about her students' discomfort and places where they seemed to move toward empathy. In the end, Carey demonstrates:

Ultimately, we can centralize the experiences of Black women and other non-dominant groups and still teach members of dominant groups how to stay in the conversation when silence may seem easier and teach them how to engage these matters and narratives with sensitivity and respect. (163)

There is much to learn from Tamika L. Carey's *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*.

About the Author

Dr. Elaine Richardson is Professor of Literacy Studies at The Ohio State University, Columbus, where she teaches in the Department of Teaching and Learning. Her books include *African American Literacies* (Routledge, 2003), focusing on teaching writing from the point of view of African American Language and Literacy traditions, *Hiphop Literacies* (Routledge, 2006), a study of Hiphop language use as an extension of Black folk traditions, and *PHD (Po H# on Dope) to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*, (New City Community Press, 2013), an urban educational memoir that chronicles her life from drugs and the street life to the university. Richardson has also co-edited two volumes on African American rhetorical theory, *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations* (Routledge, 2003) and *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Southern Illinois UP, 2004), and one volume on *Hiphop Feminism—Home Girls Make Some Noise!* (Parker Publishing, 2007). Her forthcoming book is titled *Our Literacies Matters: Reading the World with Black Girls*.