More than 800 African languages, various European and Asian languages, and innumerable pidgins and creoles await students of African communication… No amount of cultural chauvinism can deny African cultural continuities around the world. Given the many linguistic codes that are used in Black communication, it follows that the ethnography of Black communication is an equally diverse and complex matter.

(Cummings, quoted in Cummings & Daniel, 1997, p. 361)

Introduction

Melbourne S. Cummings, a graduate of University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), is one of the first Black females to have graduated with a doctorate in communication and to become active in research and service within well-known national communication venues. She shares this distinction with Dorothy Pennington and Lucia Hawthorne. Cummings has written extensively about themes that traverse the areas of African American communications: rhetoric, pedagogy, poetry, song, comedy, and television. As noted in the preceding epigraph, she has advocated the inclusion of Black rhetoric and linguistic codes as meaningful areas of communication study. Moreover, she teaches courses that span several disciplinary
perspectives and include topics related to rhetoric and public address, as well as nonverbal and intercultural communication. Cummings has served on major planning, organizational, and policy boards in regional, national, and international communication associations. She also has traveled widely in Africa, Europe, and Asia as part of intercultural exchanges in communication, international education, and religion.

Within the 30-year span of her career, Cummings has been the recipient of numerous accolades. On November 22, 2002, she was honored with the National Communication Association Mentor Award, a distinction that signifies lifelong professional achievement and active mentorship of others who have gone on to achieve success. She was the first African American scholar to receive this award, and rightfully so, because she is among a handful of scholars who have assisted in ushering more than 50 doctoral recipients in the last 30 years into our field. Several of them have become professors and have had a significant impact on both national and international communities. Cummings’s genuineness, honesty, forthrightness, and savvy ability to get things done when the bureaucracy would have it otherwise are a few among many personal qualities that have facilitated endless mentor-protégé relationships throughout her extensive career. For some professors, mentoring is an accessory to the other things they do as a teacher. Cummings places emphasis on mentoring as part of her purpose in academia, as well as her ongoing research, teaching, and professional service.

Cummings has been broadly influential throughout the discipline. More specifically, she has worked arduously to guide scholars toward establishing heuristic research in the field. As immediate past chair and faculty member of the Department of Communication and Culture at Howard University, she sat at the helm of an institution that continues to boast of having trained and graduated the vast majority of African Americans with doctoral degrees in the United States. It is not an exaggeration to say that more than half of African American communicologists who are members of the National Communication Association (NCA) are graduates or affiliates of Howard University’s graduate school and the John H. Johnson School of Communications—and have thus been directly influenced by the mentorship of Cummings. She is also a founding associate editor of the *Howard Journal of Communications* and has been an editorial board member of several academic journals inside and outside of the field of communication.

Testament to the way Cummings’s continued commitment to the advancement of the profession and her students is valued came with her honors in 1987 and 1995, respectively. First, she was presented with the NCA’s Robert J. Kibler Memorial Award, which recognizes commitment to the profession, demonstrated valuation of diversity, and vision for the possibilities of progress. Second, Cummings received the NCA Black Caucus’s Distinguished Service Award. This award is particularly significant because she is considered one of the early pioneers of the Black Caucus, being the first person of record to solely preside over the caucus during its initial years of development. In the mid-1990s, the Black Caucus facilitated the emergence of the NCA African American Communication & Culture Division, a unit whose primary foci are the production and promotion of scholarship about African American communication. Today, the Black Caucus has more than 400 members and its membership produces almost all scholarship in the field of African American rhetoric and communication.

The development and impact of Cummings's research has been important to the foundations of African American communication studies. Early in her career, she received a National Defense and Foreign Language (NDFL) grant for African Studies, which was to be used for her studies in East Africa. She has since studied, toured, and resided in more than a dozen
countries in Africa. In fact, she devised and developed (with Orlando Taylor and Lyndrey Niles) an organization whose mission was to bring together international communication scholars for discussion, sharing, and collaboration of their African and African Diaspora research, interests, and experiences at international conferences. The initial name of the organization was the World Congress on Black Communications Planning Conference (later changed to the World Congress on Communications and Development in Africa and the African Diaspora because it was deemed more appropriate by Kenyan scholars in Nairobi). The organization hosted four conferences—in Bellagio (Italy), Nairobi (Kenya), Barbados, and Senegal, respectively—before it was disbanded because of lack of funding (Daniel, 1995). Each of the conferences was sponsored or cosponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and/or Howard University. One of the important conceptual advances that originated from this conference was the notion of “orature” as a term that better described the writings that came out of Africa or its Diaspora. The term was created and introduced at the Nairobi conference by Kenyan scholars Micere Mugo and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The research presented at these conferences culminated in a book, edited by Cummings, Niles, and Taylor (1992), titled *Handbook of Communications and Development in Africa and the African Diaspora*.

Cummings has been a guest lecturer at approximately 35 high schools, colleges, and universities, sharing her research concerning African Diaspora communicative experiences.

Cummings has distinguished herself as one who genuinely cares about the well-being and success of her students and the vitality of the profession. Her vision, forthrightness, commitment, and dedication represent the best to which all academicians may aspire.

**Biographical Information**

On September 18, 1942, Melbourne S. Cummings was born as Melbourne Jean Stenson in Monroe, Louisiana, some 20 miles from her home in the small town of Rayville, Louisiana. Her parents were Theolis Stenson, from Greenwood, Mississippi, and Emma Virginia Elizabeth Brown Stenson, from Wisner, Louisiana. Theolis grew up in a small “shotgun” house and was part of a large family, for which work, even among children, was extremely valued. The family’s work expectations for him were apparent even when he attended elementary school. In fact, he was forbidden to go to school beyond the third grade because the family needed him to work. This and other pressures motivated Theolis to leave home at age 11. He ended up in a migrant camp in Louisiana, where he met Emma, his wife-to-be. She was about 14 years old when she visited the camp (her mother worked as the camp cook) and met Theolis. Unlike Theolis, Emma was raised to embrace education. Although her upbringing was not marked by the despondency experienced by her husband-to-be, she lived a modest lifestyle as a child. Besides their southern background, Theolis and Emma found they had a lot in common and enjoyed one another's company. They married a year later—Emma was only 15 years old, and Theolis was 20. They decided to settle in Rayville, Louisiana, not far from Emma’s childhood home.

Raised in an era of Jim Crow segregation, Theolis and Emma earned only a modest living. He began working in the town’s cotton gin, but the earnings from that job were insufficient to support his wife and eight children. He decided to become a pipe layer, which paid much more, but the job took him from Rayville to Houston, Texas. Although his family continued to live in Rayville, Theolis spent the majority of his time working in Houston. He would come home only on holidays and special occasions such as birthdays and graduations. Cummings, who was five when her father left home to work in Houston, recalled:
He would always come home on the holidays and bring mason jars full of pennies he had saved for us. I remember he would also buy us big gifts for special occasions. There was one instance where my mother told him I wanted a leather coat, since a lot of the kids had leatherette coats in my neighborhood. He surprised me by bringing home a leather coat he purchased from Neiman Marcus. I didn't understand the significance of that until much later. I think that was his way of reminding us he was still there and he loved us. (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004)

Emma was a cook—as her mother was. Her primary role was to raise her kids and to supplement her husband's financial support of the family. Emma attended school through the 11th grade, and education was very important to her, so she made sacrifices to see that her children went to school. Religion and spirituality were also very important. Emma and all her kids were very active in one of the local churches—Mt. Zion Baptist Church. In fact, the Stenson family lived next door to the church, and Cummings played piano for the children's choir.

Cummings's parents were very influential, instilling values of hard work, creativity, open-mindedness, honesty, and self-motivation. Some evidence of many of these traits is exemplified in Cummings's musical instrument training. She enjoyed the luxury of playing the piano, beginning at age four and continuing until she reached college, so she never had to work in the cotton fields during the summer, as her siblings and friends had to do. She also played the clarinet and the bell lyre in the high school band. The family lived modestly, as did most of the families in Cummings's close-knit community, but Emma was quite well-known and respected.

Cummings was the fourth of eight children. In a personal interview, she explained:

> They used to say that she [my mother Emma Stenson] had two sets of children because of the age differences, and so I'm the middle child even though I'm the fourth, since there are eight. My sister, whom I'm next to, is five years older than I am. The one whom she is next to is six years older than she. They assumed that I was the last. However, after I was born, the children continued to be born: four more came just about every two years. So, they say that I am the youngest of the first set and oldest of the second set of children—a very special place in the family. I am sort of everybody's favorite. (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004)

Cummings's siblings, in order from eldest to youngest, were Theolis, Zeofious Lee, Susie Pearl, Henry James, Emma Jo, Dennis Coley, and Lillian Faye. All are still living except Theolis, who died of a stroke just three months after his mother passed. Emma had a long bout with diabetes and eventually succumbed on April 19, 1996—her 81st birthday. Cummings recalled:

> It was a beautiful passing. It was quiet and peaceful. It seemed as if we could see the pain leave her face. We were sort of content with that. Everybody sort of played his or her part in her life and she in theirs, since she had been such a warrior for us. She was an absolutely wonderful mother. (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004)

Although the town of Rayville was as racist as any other southern town, Cummings remembers that most parents attempted to shelter their children from most of the negative effects of racism. She remembers feeling no real sense of exclusion or any negative effects of
the ill treatment that usually attends racism. She revealed:

My mother was a cook, and, at one time, she worked in houses, cleaning houses and taking care of Whites’ children. And so, in one of the families for whom she worked, the woman of the house was a seamstress—actually, a tailor—and she liked me for some reason. She didn’t really know me that well, but she knew my mother, and my mother would always talk about her children. Because I excelled in school, she always made dresses for me. So, sometimes when I had things that were special that I had to do—like, if I had to go to a State Fair or something like that, she would make me a dress. I didn’t have really terrible experiences with Whites. (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004)

Cummings told a story about going to the home of a White family to pick up her sister’s housecleaning wages. Having no qualms about approaching anyone, she went straight to the front of the house and knocked on the door. She did not know that “colored people” had to go around to the rear of White people’s homes. The White gentleman of the house opened the door ever so slightly and kindly explained that she had to go around back because he could not let the air conditioning out. Cummings had never heard of air conditioning, but it sounded feasible, so she obliged by going to the rear of the home. In retrospect, Cummings reasoned that he had his (White) code of conduct to uphold, and she had to do what she was expected to do. It was the code of the South. The gentleman gave her the money and a piece of candy from the back door and then sent her on her way. In retrospect, Cummings appreciated the care he had taken to not damage her self-esteem. (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004)

According to Cummings, Blacks and Whites in Rayville, although clearly segregated, lived generally as civilly as the times permitted. In fact, several Blacks were local business owners. Cummings noted,

Of course, we had many White businesses, but we also had a few Black decently paid professionals: morticians, grocery store owners, teachers, dry cleaning business owners, bar and nightclub owners, carpenters, repairmen, as well as beauty and barber shop owners. (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004)

Blacks still enacted routine deference to Whites. Black men were still called “boys” and were expected to address White girls as “Miss” after they reached a certain age. As a 12-year-old child, Cummings, who was affectionately known to family and close friends as “Peaches,” discovered that one of the deacons in her church was calling all the teenaged Black girls “Miss.” The kids made fun of him, and Cummings recalls thinking that he was ridiculous, until her mother said to her, “What you don’t understand is that he is required to call little White girls ‘Miss’ and he feels that if he has to call them that, then he should grant the girls of his own race the same respect.” These three anecdotes bespeak the kind of upbringing Cummings remembers having. She acknowledges that her perceptions were not called into question until her interactions in college with northern Blacks. (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004)

Academic Background and Experience

Melbourne S. Cummings attended Rayville Rosenwald School, a K–12 school named after a White southern philanthropist who endowed southern schools for Blacks to attend. The high school was later renamed Eula D. Britton High School to honor the Black principal of the
school. Cummings's education took place in a regular school with several buildings that were very similar to the White school buildings—except that the White school was made of brick and had the latest equipment and school supplies. Rayville was the parish seat, so it fared a little better than surrounding school districts. The four women who had the greatest influence on Cummings during her school years were Mrs. Stevens, Mrs. Mansfield, Mrs. Smith, and Mrs. Austin. Mrs. Austin taught Cummings how to write effectively. Mrs. Mansfield taught math, and Mrs. Smith taught a broad range of courses in eighth grade. Mrs. Stevens introduced her to the library and taught her how to use it. Cummings also went to the town's "colored" public library, which had a fairly extensive collection, despite not having many of the most up-to-date books. The library contained the classics and many of the old discarded volumes from the White library. Cummings's initial interest in writing and writers was piqued during these library visits.

After graduating from high school at age 17 with a 4.0 grade point average, Cummings enrolled as an English major at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There was never a doubt in her mind—or in the minds of her family, teachers, and community members—that she would go to college. Cummings chose Southern University because it had a solid academic program and had a reputation as the largest and one of the best Black schools in the United States. Its enrollment included students from all over the world, several of whom were from Africa. Cummings thoroughly enjoyed her collegiate experience and was self-motivated to be a model student. Although several of her siblings went to college, Cummings was the only one in her family to graduate from college. She was mentored in college by Dr. Blydon Jackson and Dr. William Couch, both of whom coincidentally moved to North Carolina—Dr. Jackson went to the University of North Carolina, and Dr. Couch moved to North Carolina Central University (NCCU). At about the same time, Cummings left Southern University for NCCU. A year after she earned her bachelor's degree in English at age 20, Cummings went on to earn her master's degree, also in English, from NCCU.

The primary area of research for Cummings's master of arts degree program was dramatic literature, with a specific focus on Eugene O'Neill. At that time, much of the entire program of study in dramatic literature was centered on British literature (O'Neill was an exception). Although Black literature was far outside the curricula, Dr. Couch was a specialist in it, so he taught interested students outside of the formal classrooms. He also generated Black literature reading lists. This had a profound effect on Cummings's thinking, and Dr. Couch became her master's thesis advisor.

Just before graduating from NCCU in 1964, Cummings met her husband-to-be, Robert Cummings, who had received a full scholarship to NCCU from the state of Florida. During this time, Blacks were discouraged from attending White colleges by receiving full scholarships to attend any school located outside of the state. Black students applied to a White state university and received a scholarship to attend the out-of-state school of their choice. The state would not reject Black students in writing; it would just invite them to attend a predominantly Black state school with a scholarship. For this reason, Robert decided to attend NCCU. He had been taking classes in graduate school for a while, teaching high school during the school year and matriculating through his graduate program only during the summers. Robert met Melbourne Jean Stenson at NCCU in 1964. Six months later—on his birthday, December 22, 1964—they were married while he was completing his master's degree in history. Cummings had just completed her thesis, "Critical Analysis of Selected Dramatic Plays of Eugene O'Neill." Shortly after the wedding, Melbourne and Robert Cummings moved to his home state of Florida, where they lived separately (she in Fort Lauderdale; he in Dade City, near Tampa) for a year and saw one another only on weekends.
She taught English and chaired the English department at Crispus Attucks High School. The following year, she taught at Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University (FAMU) before returning with her husband to North Carolina to teach English at Winston-Salem State University. Cummings taught at Winston-Salem State University for three years, from 1966 to 1969, and subsequently moved with her husband to California to pursue doctorates at UCLA. Cummings's doctorate was to be in African literature. The decision to move to UCLA was based on a State Department Fulbright-Hayes grant that Robert received to institute African Studies into “teacher education” institutions. So Robert's proposed idea for the funded award was to attend UCLA, which had a thriving African Studies Center, to get ideas for instituting African Studies. After touring parts of Africa, Robert would then return to his home institution and implement the strategies and suggestions.

Upon her arrival at UCLA in 1969, Cummings quickly learned that the study of African literature was neither a pursuit the English Department respected nor intended to support. Her only options were to stay in the program to study Shakespeare and Chaucer or to find another program. Although Cummings was trained in British literature, it was not her primary interest, so she took classes in the English graduate program while actively searching for another program of study. A year later, Cummings heard about Arthur L. Smith (now known as Molefi Kete Asante), a new young professor in the Speech Communication department. She discovered that his teaching and research interests were aligned with hers, so she transferred to the Speech Communication department, using her accumulated credits in English from the previous year to fulfill her cognate requirements. Although they were the same age, Arthur Smith became Cummings’s professor, mentor, advisor, and lifelong friend. Andrea Rich, a White scholar and research collaborator of Smith's, also became a major formative influence in terms of Cummings's understanding of interracial communication. As a graduate teaching assistant, Cummings taught interracial communication and rhetoric courses. She was one of three Black graduate students in the program—the other two, who were master's degree students at the time, were Shirley Weber and Marcia Clinkscales. With Smith's guidance, Cummings specialized in Black rhetoric, graduating in 1972, with a Ph.D. in Speech Communication from UCLA. Her dissertation, which she wrote under Smith's direction, was titled, “The Rhetoric of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Leading Advocate of the African Emigration Movement, 1868–1907.”

Immediately after graduation, Cummings and her husband moved to Kenya for the required research year as part of his program of study for the Ph.D. Two years later, on August 19, 1974, Cummings gave birth to the first of their two sons, Samori. By this time, they changed their plans of returning to Winston-Salem and instead took positions in Miami, Florida. Cummings had a position at Florida International University as assistant professor in English and Communications, and Robert was director of African American Studies at the University of Miami. They stayed in Miami for three years and then moved in 1976 to Washington, D.C., where Cummings became an associate professor in the Howard University Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at the age of 33. Her husband was appointed director of Howard's African Studies Center. At the time of Cummings's appointment, Orlando Taylor was department chair of the School of Communications, and Lyndrey Niles was its associate dean. Taylor and Niles launched significant programs of research in Black communication studies and were active participants in founding the Speech Communication Association Black Caucus. On May 10, 1978, within two years of arriving at Howard University, Cummings's second son, Samir, was born. She had just become director of Graduate Affairs and served a six-year term, beginning in 1980, as associate dean of the School of Communications before becoming department chair in 1993. Cummings found the environment at Howard to be comfortable and conducive to her research and personal interests. Cummings was mentored
by the vice president of Academic Affairs, Lorraine Williams, and this relationship was one of her most fruitful academic mentoring experiences.

The combination of being at Howard University, the nation's leading historically Black university, and being a mother of two young children significantly affected Cummings's lifestyle and cultural consciousness. She had been wearing her hair natural as an afro for at least 10 years before her second child was born, which signified a sense of cultural pride indicative of the civil rights activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Cummings was trained by Arthur Smith (Molefi Asante) and was working alongside Orlando Taylor, a speech pathologist who, in collaboration with Gloria Walker, founded the Black Caucus of the American Speech and Hearing Association and the Speech Communication Association.

Contributions to Communication Research

Early in her tenure at Howard University, Melbourne S. Cummings sharpened her awareness of the issues confronting not only Blacks in the field of communication but also the study of Black rhetoric. The entire field of communication was founded around the turn of the 20th century, but it really began to flourish in the 1920s. With the exception of a very few works, such as historian Carter G. Woodson's catalogue of speeches, *The Negro and His Orations* (Woodson, 1925), it was not until the late 1960s that nondeprecating literature concerning Black communication and rhetoric finally emerged. Although there was much to study, many White scholars chose to study European-American discursive experiences from Eurocentric perspectives. When there were studies of Blacks, the discussions often centered on eugenicist views of the intellectual and behavioral incapacity of Blacks—or their so-called heathen dispositions. This racist portrayal of Blacks severely impoverished the study of Black communication, so before any analysis of rhetoric could begin, there was a constant underlying imperative to reconcile depictions of Black rhetoric and to claim a space where it could be celebrated.

Besides Cummings, many Black scholars took part in the emergence and celebration of Black communication research at this time: Arthur Smith, Lucia Hawthorne, Charles Hurst, Fela Sowande, Dorothy Pennington, Jack Daniel, Orlando Taylor, Gloria Walker, Marcia Clinkscales, and others. Cummings's research was pioneering and heuristic because of its nuanced insistence that extant rhetorical traditions include Black rhetorical traditions, especially in the study of Black rhetors. To fully comprehend the significance of Cummings's scholarship, it is necessary to explore the programmatic areas of her research, which covered three primary themes: constituting Black rhetoric, Black public address, and Black popular culture.

Constituting Black Rhetoric

Like a lens zooming in and out to get a panoramic view of its surroundings, Cummings sought both to study Black rhetoric and to question why Black rhetoric had been absent from disciplinary conversations in the first place. She remarked:

As we took classes, we realized there was not a whole lot of stuff that we could put our hands on, except for a speech by Frederick Douglass or Booker T. Washington—one, two of those. We saw how very difficult it was for people to just accept Black literature, Black rhetoric, and etcetera, in my classes. They would say things like, “That's good, but everything you do is about black people.” And my response, just initially was a sort of angry response: “Everything you do is about white people, but
at least what I do is about black people all over the world." So, that was one of the things that I wanted to do—in my contributions—I wanted to teach students to know about their heritage. (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004)

Cummings's first article was a review essay published in the *Journal of Black Studies* titled "Problems of Researching Black Rhetoric" (Cummings, 1972). In this article, she said, "Most established (White) rhetoricians have found only Black speakers such as Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr. acceptable for rhetorical study, and even these studies have been, for the most part, cursory, superficial, and conventional" (Cummings, 1972, p. 503). Given that Cummings's postsecondary intellectual development and cultural consciousness were heavily influenced by the sociopolitical context in which the civil rights movement flourished, exercising voice and agency were very important acts. To have one's voice suppressed and disenfranchised was due cause for any citizen to protest against the establishment. Although the historical records have consistently chronicled protests at colleges and universities, intellectual battles were also being waged by academicians against universities for promoting culturally exclusive and homogeneous curricula. Cummings's strategy was to point to and develop a set of resources that would be readily available as a reply to those who would claim that Black rhetoric and communication could not be taught because they were systematized areas of inquiry. The first step in implementing this strategy was to note up-front the challenges of gaining access to public address source materials. Some of these challenges included referencing speeches by Black dignitaries that were delivered extemporaneously without notes; finding media information about nontranscribed speeches such as letters, newspaper reports, and family memoirs; locating books by Blacks that are either out of print or were initially published with low print runs; and critically assessing sources reporting speeches to ascertain any political and/or social bias.

These challenges have pervaded the study of Black rhetoric since the early 1970s. Nonetheless, Cummings and Daniel (1992) wanted to note the paradigmatic consistencies found in Black rhetorical texts. To do so, the authors turned their attention to interdisciplinary approaches to Black rhetoric, from anthropology and sociolinguistics to literature and psychology. In explicating the distinct oratorical features of Black rhetorical texts, they could more easily distinguish between varying speaking styles exposed in, for example, the Melville Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier debate or the philosophical dialogues of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Cummings and Daniel's study also called for an advanced understanding of Black texts as not simply speeches to be collected or deserving of only a cursory scholarly glance but also speeches that should be systematically studied to uncover the rhetorical strategies and cultural nuances employed. Moreover, they wanted readers to know that the sermonic tradition, as seen via traditional Black preaching, is a site richly enhanced by variations in tonality, pitch, rate, pauses, and dynamic interplay between speaker and audience. Clearly, this oral tradition was classical in its own right, but distinct from White classical rhetorical paradigms. The argument developed in Cummings's studies of Black rhetoric is that the criteria for oratorical effectiveness are different for Black audiences and communities, so if scholars are to analyze Black orators, they ought to be aware of the cultural context and criteria that impinge on the speaker. She has consistently called for comparative studies that explain and constitute the Black communication genres throughout the African Diaspora and within multiple communal contexts (Cummings, 1982; Cummings, 1992; Cummings, 1995a; Cummings & Daniel, 1992; Cummings & Roy, 2002).

**Black Public Address**

Public address is often considered an extension or rubric of rhetoric. In fact, some have
alternatively named it podium rhetoric. As mentioned earlier, Cummings was trained as a rhetorician at UCLA under the tutelage of Arthur Smith (Molefi Asante), who was director of the Center for Black Studies and associate professor of communications. His research was primarily concerned with revolutionary rhetoric at the time, and this was filtered throughout the rhetoric classes he taught. Much of Cummings's Black public address research emerges out of this tradition. Throughout her career, she has studied the speeches of such prominent orators as Booker T. Washington (Cummings, 1977), Andrew Young (Cummings, 1979), Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (Cummings, 1982), Martin Luther King, Jr. (Cummings & Niles, 1991/1992; Cummings, 1995b), and Mary McLeod Bethune (Cummings, 1996).

Cummings analyzed Booker T. Washington's "compromise" speech—he was asked to share the speaking platform with White southerners while speaking to an interracial audience. Cummings asserted, "He admonished Blacks that they should stop seeking social and political equality, and begin working to attain economic respectability" (Cummings, 1977, p. 77). This "pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps" industrial education approach became famously associated with Washington's philosophical stance, and he quickly became known as an accommodationist. He also produced results as he attempted to mend racial relations, however, and wherever he spoke, White supporters would donate money and sundry items to his cause—industrial education for Blacks. This agrarian ideal was attractive to Whites who were still resistant to formal education in the classroom, so they supported Washington because he seemed to understand that school was no place for Blacks. At the same time, he brought hope to Black sharecroppers by promising them that the time was ripe for seizing commercial opportunities in the South.

Like Washington, Andrew Young was also a bridge builder for race relations in the South, but he lived in a different era. Young was a Congregationalist preacher (Cummings, 1979) and a politician who benefited from his association with a loyal support base in the southern Black church. He also enhanced his political clout as "Martin Luther King, Jr. 's lieutenant ... and chief mediator" responsible for "organizing the church structure to achieve racial equality in areas such as jobs, education, and public accommodation" (Cummings, 1979, p. 228), as well as by establishing a liaison between the Black and White communities. Although he was soft-spoken, Young was always honest, morally righteous, and direct with his constituencies, whether it was as minister of the church or as United Nations ambassador. Cummings described how this created problems in his political roles yet enhanced his respectability in the church. Nonetheless, Cummings maintained that Young agreed to become the United Nations ambassador because he could see the potential he had in this position to use it as a pulpit—and he did that well.

Although Martin Luther King, Jr., had no political aspirations, he was a Baptist minister whose oratory was respected for "its vivid imagery, its fluid style, its piercing truths, and its inspiring admonitions" (Cummings & Niles, 1991/1992, p. 49). King is perhaps the most studied orator of all time, but Cummings (1995b) managed to find something heuristic to discuss when exploring King's references to death in his speeches. Cummings and Niles (1991/1992) noted:

King personally believed that he was carrying out the will of God as he worked tirelessly to obliterate injustices in the United States and then the world ... After 1965, his speeches became even clearer testaments of an almost eerie closeness with God. Even now when one listens to recordings of his late speeches, one is likely to feel simultaneously chilled and calmed by his passionate pleas. (p. 54)

Rather than simply chronicle the moments leading up to his death, Cummings and Niles
Cummings had an attraction to rhetors who were revolutionaries. She enjoyed studying the speeches of people who established or participated in countermovements. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, the subject of her dissertation, was one such individual. He was a Methodist Episcopal minister who became an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister and bishop. Cummings's analysis of Turner's oratory demonstrated a shift in his perspective over the years, from accommodationist to Black nationalist-separatist. Turner consistently worked in the “back to Africa” movement, trying to convince Blacks that they had no other alternative except to leave the country if they wanted to find freedom and manhood. He experienced some backlash from Blacks about his emigrationist perspective, but he was steadfast in his convictions, claiming that because Blacks are descendants from Africa, they would be returning home. Despite the drawbacks related to declines in physical health, “Turner's rhetoric grew in intensity with each adverse argument presented to him” (Cummings, 1982, p. 462). He was in search of respect and freedom, which he believed would never be granted to Blacks in America.

Cummings's research concerning Black rhetoric and public address illustrates a theory-to-method approach. In her early career work, she concentrated on explicating the need to research, teach, theorize about, and maintain Black rhetorical traditions. Her subsequent research has applied the early theorizing about Black idiom and Black rhetorical tropes to the rhetorical analyses of prominent Black leaders. Although Black rhetoric and public address are Cummings's two primary lines of research, she has also dabbled in studies of Black popular culture.

Black Popular Culture

In 1988, Cummings wrote an article for the *Journal of Popular Culture* that explored the “The Changing Image of the Black Family on Television” (Cummings, 1988). In this insightful essay, she examined stereotypical media representations, or what Donald Bogle (1973) named the “pantheon”—toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks. She discussed a wide range of televised Black images and roles—from variety shows such as *Ed Sullivan's Toast of the Town* to the *Amos 'n Andy Show* to 227, *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, and *The Cosby Show*—with particular attention to the perpetuation, disintegration, and/or amelioration of Black images. Noticing the continued patterns of pantheon figures spanning television programs, Cummings asserted, “For every positive feature of *The Jeffersons*, the character of George had at least two negatives. He was not only loud and boisterous, he was ostentatious, ignorant, a bigot, and a chauvinist” (Cummings, 1988, p. 79). She continued to point out the underlying tensions between stereotype and saving grace and concluded that although TV executives appear responsive to the public outcry for more progressive images, they seemed unrelentingly tied to retrogressive and pathologized representations of Blacks. Of all the shows discussed, she maintained that *The Cosby Show* appeared least problematic.

Because of this interest in mass-mediated effects of stereotypical images on children, Cummings and Roy (2002) coauthored a study of the manifestations of Afrocentricity on rap music. In this study, they investigated the various facets of the Afrocentric communication paradigm as latently expressed in hip-hop music. After analyzing the lyrics of several popular rap songs, they discovered that the objectives of rap music appear aligned with Afrocentric rhetorical notions of “balance, harmony, and transcendence in community” (Cummings & Roy, 2002, p. 59).
The three themes Cummings has explored throughout her career are Black rhetoric, Black public address, and Black popular culture. Each is linked to her developed interests in investigating organized responses to constraints on freedom of expression. Each openly critiques the strengths and limitations of these resistance efforts, but acknowledges that the fundamental goal of revolutionary rhetoric is to retrieve agency over self-definition. With that in mind, Cummings's research can be characterized as a set of visionary and transformative perspectives concerning social justice and cultural inclusiveness.

Conclusion

Melbourne S. Cummings is a pioneer of communication, not only because of the magnitude or quantity of her publications but also because of her total contributions to the field of communication in leadership, mentoring, teaching, and research. As the quintessential teacher, even her research and leadership instruct us. She has worked steadily toward enhancing the placement and respect of paradigms related to Black rhetoric and public address so that following generations will not have to. Cummings did not create a new theory. Instead, she left her mark on the field of communication by developing a line of inquiry that directly challenged mainstream communication scholarship and provided a set of studies that exemplified how one might analyze Black rhetoric, with particular attention to constituent aspects of a Black rhetorical canon. Her legacy teaches communication scholars that there are multiple cultural standards, models, and discourses worthy of attention and inclusion. As a community organizer and proud mother of two sons—Samori is a physician, and Samir is a lawyer—Cummings has maintained that her family life "stands as a testament that success is possible despite the odds" (M. S. Cummings, personal communication, May 11, 2004), that society can structurally stack against marginalized communities. She has also taught us that although some scholars (Black and non-Black) offer knee-jerk reactions to systematic exclusion from curricula, leadership, and full disciplinary participation, a well-structured proactive response—exemplified via research, teaching, and service—yields more effective results. Finally, the greatest mentoring lesson her life and career can teach us is that as we maintain family balance, professional integrity, and moral convictions, we must also continue to lift as we climb!

References

Further Reading

Melbourne S. Cummings
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Born as Melbourne Jean Stenson in Monroe, Louisiana, on September 18.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Graduated from North Carolina Central University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Married Robert Cummings on December 22.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Taught at Florida Agricultural &amp; Mechanical University (FAMU).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Wrote the article, “Problems of Researching Black Rhetoric” for the <em>Journal of Black Studies</em>.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Received a doctorate in Rhetoric from UCLA. Her dissertation was titled, “The Rhetoric of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Leading Advocate of the African Emigration Movement, 1868–1907.”</td>
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<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Gave birth to first son, Samori, on August 19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Became associate professor in the Howard University Department of Communication Arts and Sciences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Gave birth to second son, Samir, on May 10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Received the National Communication Association's Robert J. Kibler Memorial Award.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Published the “Changing Images of the Black Family on Television” in the <em>Journal of Popular Culture</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Became department chair of the School of Communications at Howard University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Received the National Communication Association (NCA) Black Caucus's Distinguished Service Award.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Published “The Study of African American rhetoric” (with Jack Daniel) in <em>The Rhetoric of Western Thought</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Published the article, “Manifestations of Afrocentricity on Rap Music” in the <em>Howard Journal of Communications</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Received the National Communication Association (NCA) Mentor Award on November 22.</td>
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- black studies
- rhetoric
- African diaspora
- caucuses
- Howard University
- African studies
- speech communication

[http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452225692.n5](http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452225692.n5)