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An African Centered Approach to Composition:  
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Elaine Bernadette Richardson

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**AN AFRICAN CENTERED APPROACH TO COMPOSITION:  
FREEDOM THROUGH CULTURALLY RELEVANT  
LITERACY INSTRUCTION**

**By**

**Elaine Bernadette Richardson**

**A DISSERTATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **AN AFRICAN CENTERED APPROACH TO COMPOSITION: FREEDOM THROUGH CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERACY INSTRUCTION**

**By**

**Elaine Bernadette Richardson**

The written literacy acquisition of students from the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) Culture is not on par with students of the dominant culture (Applebee et. al. 1986, 1990; Chapman 1994). AAVE speaking students are still placed disproportionately in college level remedial writing courses (Rose 1989). Cultural conflict has been identified as a major factor in educational settings in general (Ogbu 1994) and in composition classrooms in particular (Fox 1990; Heath 1993; Moss & Walters 1993; Campbell 1994). There is a problem with teaching AAVE speaking students to write that has still not been sufficiently addressed.

In order to counteract cultural conflict that may hinder literacy development for African American students, an African Centered approach to composition was designed. The curriculum sought to improve AAVE speaking students' command of academic discourse and develop critical consciousness of themselves and their environment. The African Centered approach revolves around an interrogation of AAVE Culture: the Black literacy tradition (including themes of the Black experience), language/discourse styles, and unwritten social codes. AAVE language and culture is

contrasted with the language of wider communication (LWC) Culture including the academy--a quasi bidialectal approach.

The curriculum was taught to volunteer undergraduate students over one semester. Students were exposed to African Centered literature and instructional stimuli. The writing produced in the course was rated by professional composition instructors from the vantage point of acceptable academic discourse. Quantitative analyses focused on writing assessment, degree of AAVE in relationship to LWC syntax, Black discourse, and degree of African Self Consciousness. Qualitative measures provided indices of student degree of African Centered consciousness and attitudes towards their abilities as writers and the writing process.

It was found that low achieving students made significant gain in the essay scores from pre to post, that students wrote lengthier essays from pre to post, pre curriculum essays employing more Black discourse received favorable ratings, and that students reported significantly more positive attitudes toward writing by the end of the course.

The study has implications for the implementation of AAVE Culture in writing pedagogy.

**Dedicated to all of those who have been counted out.**

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Thank you ancestors for surviving slavery and flourishing in what became America and the West Indies. It is the blood of those Africans that flows through my veins--their dreams and hopes have hoisted me. I have had so much help that I can't name every person God put in my path to help me achieve this goal. But I'll name a few: Tauntie, Andrea, Ms. Johnson, Dr. Soules, Rev. Sutton & Sardis, Ted, John, Mr. Brownlowe, Dr. Edwards, Rashidah, Marge, Jackie, Dr. Denise, Dr. Glo, Dr. Ira, Ezra! My committee: Drs. Stock, Wilson and Brunner. Thanks to experts in CCCC for rating essays. Thanks to the African English 290 students.

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## Chapter 1

### **INTRODUCTION: AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AND LITERACY-- AN OVERVIEW OF THE STRUGGLE**

We have not been allowed to acquire true literacy. That acquisition would necessitate an analysis of who we are and would point a critical finger at the continued racist and classist nature of America. Such an analysis would not focus simply on the horrors of slavery, but rather on the horrors of the legacy of slavery in American classrooms today. (Epps, 1985:155)

The purpose of this research project was twofold: 1) to develop, teach, and pilot test an African Centered composition curriculum; and 2) to describe, analyze, and assess student writing produced under these instructional conditions. My hypothesis was that centering of the language and culture of students from the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) Culture into academic writing pedagogy may enhance such students' production of academic discourse and development of critical literacy. For African American students the struggle for literacy reveals a long and uniquely complex history of miseducation (Woodson, 1933; Smitherman, 1990). Linguists, educational theorists and composition experts agree that cultural conflict has been and continues to be a major impediment to African American students' literacy development (Labov, 1972; Shaughnessy, 1977; Fox, 1990; Heath, 1993; Moss & Walters, 1993; Campbell, 1993; Ogbu, 1994). This chapter provides an

overview of the struggle of African American students in their quest for literacy and the relationship of Composition<sup>1</sup> to that struggle.

Scholars have pondered over questions surrounding the language and literacy acquisition of Africans for centuries. Some of the major questions have been and continue to be: is the African of the human species capable of reading, writing, and thinking in the manner of Europeans? do Africans possess a language and culture distinct from that of the dominant European culture which reflects their experiences and world view? In the early 1900s the questions were: what purpose was education to serve the Negro?; will vocational education or higher education best serve the race? Around the 1960s the questions were: if African Americans do have a "sub-culture," how do their cultural differences influence the teaching and learning of literacy? is the cognitive or learning style of the African American a significant factor in literacy acquisition and development?

Since the 1960s, the push for multicultural and Afrocentric approaches to education has been spawned by the recognition that culture is the most vital element at the

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<sup>1</sup>.

The "C" is capitalized to signify Composition as a profession/field. The lower case "c" will be employed when referring to the craft itself.

core of human experience. Cultural sensitivity is an integral part of the educational process. Hence, the development of multicultural and Afrocentric approaches to education strive to tap into the differing learning styles and perspectives of the respective learners in the classroom. Within any one cultural group, the African (American) body of learners notwithstanding, there exists a wealth of diversity in learning styles and interests. Tapping into the potential and talents of humans is at once vital and problematic. At the present time, there is still much room for development of multicultural teaching methods.

Up through the 1950s, Social Darwinism and eugenics influenced American educational and social policy. These theories provided the rationale for the unequal education which African Americans largely received (Karier, 1972). The dominant thinking was that Africans were uncivilized and had made no contributions to the civilized world. In this view, Europeans had brought them to the "New World," and offered them salvation by systematically dismantling their past and creating their future. Africans deserved the fate they had met because this was their place in the Great Chain of Being, the bottom. The Europeans were the fittest, and God had left them in charge of worldly affairs. So even after emancipation, second class citizenship was the common experience for the masses of African Americans. There was

no need to educate African Americans for leadership positions in the larger society. Their disenfranchisement was a result of intellectual and genetic inferiority. The "separate but equal" doctrine, made law in 1896 (*Plessy vs. Ferguson*), along with poverty and a shortage of qualified teachers, made it difficult for the masses to obtain quality education, not to mention critical literacy.

Violas (1978) states that in the twentieth century industrial education movement, many saw industrial education as a means to "elevate the colored race." On the other hand, education had to be of the kind that would not disturb the southern labor system. Violas (1978) cites a 1909 article in the Chicago Daily Tribune which states that President Taft expressed support of industrial education to Booker T. Washington because "too many of the students at [B]lack liberal arts colleges had become professionals and were agitating for political rights...." Although fortunate Blacks could receive an education and become a "Negro<sup>2</sup>" professional through the historically black universities, the masses of African Americans were encouraged to pursue industrial education as a means of securing menial positions

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<sup>2</sup>. The emphasis on Negro here is not to discredit the educational experience provided by historically Black universities, but to underscore the fact that the common assumption was that professional and "Negro" were thought to be mutually exclusive.

or trades.

Not only did underlying theories of Social Darwinism and eugenics influence educational policies, they also influenced research on Black language (Smitherman, 1988). Studies by scholars such as Harrison (1884), Krapp (1924), and Mencken (1919) contended that African Americans had learned very basic speech patterns from their masters which evolved into the "Negro's" style of "baby talk" (Copeland-Lanier, 1974). Still other scholars, such as Bennett (1908), believed that the only surviving African features of Black speech were "intonation, inflection and tonal quality," and a few African words. The scholars believed, for instance, that the speech of Gullah Blacks was copied from "illiterate Colonial indentured servants, among them the humble Scotch, Scotch-Irish, and the Irish-English deportations" (Copeland-Lanier, 1974). This school of thought, however, was countered by the work of Turner (1949) and Herskovits (1958).

Turner and Herskovits had long argued that Blacks did have an African cultural and linguistic heritage. Through thorough study of the Gullah language and African languages, Turner discovered naming practices as well as "African survivals in sound and syntax to counter the baby-talk myths." In the 1960s, other scholars such as Stewart, Dillard, and Bailey produced evidence which indicated that

AAVE was probably the result of the overlay of a largely English vocabulary on African syntactical structures. These linguists asserted that a pidgin was formed along the West African coast, developed into a creole which survived the middle passage, and became more and more decreolized. Just as Turner had professed earlier, linguists were beginning to link AAVE with Africa, and show that African Americans had a distinct culture and identity (Smitherman, 1988).

Before Brown vs. Board (1954), students from the AAVE Culture were by and large taught by African American teachers who knew first hand the language and culture of their students. It is not unreasonable to assume that these pre 1954 African American teachers were sympathetic to the problem their students faced, that of becoming bicultural, since they themselves had lived through it. However, with the advent of integration and later open admissions, AAVE students were taught by teachers who did not share their background. Even Black teachers themselves began to be educated by the same system as their white counterparts and thus lacked the information and/or training needed to facilitate culturally relevant literacy education for AAVE students.

Although AAVE has been legitimized as African-based by linguists and educators for over three decades, especially since the late 1970s with the highly publicized Ann Arbor

("Black English") King case, it is still commonly viewed as a social handicap. A recent Detroit News article illustrates this point. The article's author, Thomas Sowell (1995), is a respected Black academician. He argues that AAVE is a leftover from a debased British cultural group that was transplanted to the American South; this leftover was picked up and held on to by less educated Blacks. Sowell goes on to present points that have long been disproven by expert linguists (i.e. AAVE has no connection to Africa). He also erroneously argues that the Ann Arbor "Black English case" was about teachers trying to get "ghetto students to speak standard English rather than [AAVE]." King was not about teachers trying to get students to speak standard English rather than AAVE. It was about teachers placing students in special education classes because they spoke AAVE. Thank God Judge Joiner ruled that teachers should receive training that allowed them to recognize AAVE as a viable rule-governed language reflecting the cultural and social background of the students rather than a cognitive deficiency. King clearly established that teachers themselves needed to become familiar enough with AAVE to inform their pedagogical approaches to the literacy education of their students. Unfortunately, those who control the mainstream media think nothing of having well-respected scholars, like Sowell, publicly denounce AAVE.

Sowell (1995) writes:

In the normal course of events, cultural characteristics come and go, as people decide what to treasure and what to discard. That is why most blacks ... adjust to new circumstances and new opportunities. But those blacks who have not yet made it beyond the cultural handicaps of the past are being encouraged to cling to this millstone around their necks. (Detroit News, 3b)

Sowell's position reflects the society's general sentiment that AAVE is a social liability.

It is no small wonder that the educational system has not taken a more progressive pedagogical stance on the language and literacy instruction of African Americans. In fact, teachers use various, (informed and not so informed), approaches to teaching composition to AAVE students. Lee (1994) discusses the "lingering conflict in the schools." She traces the controversial history of public literacy education for African American students and the problems that schools and teachers face when they are left to their own devices in teaching "standard English" to children whose first language is AAVE. Lee uncovered several teaching strategies, at the kindergarten through 12th grade level. In such districts, the common approach consists of teachers lecturing on the correctness of "standard English." Aside from such traditional Eurocentric strategies, a few districts with no explicit policies have progressive teachers who create their own curricula employing stories



which utilize code switching, job seeking, and style shifting. The creation of a dictionary of AAVE vocabulary words was a strategy used by one progressive middle school teacher, as identified by Lee. The most innovative and effective strategy was one modeled on the ("standard") English as a Second Language (ESL) philosophy. The Los Angeles County school district that espoused this policy employed strategies which included contrastive analysis, code switching, practical life skills applications of "standard" English, and various activities which promoted biculturalism. Although educational institutions today acknowledge the origins and validity of AAVE, the deficit perspective of AAVE Culture is so deeply ingrained in the American consciousness that no unequivocal mainstream movement has been initiated to incorporate AAVE into the literacy experiences of students of the AAVE Culture. Thus, we have the unique situation of AAVE students. For the most part, they are left stranded in classrooms where AAVE Culture is not factored into the literacy experience in a beneficial manner.

#### **COMPOSITION AND AAVE STUDENTS**

The composition classroom has traditionally been responsible for the literacy training of college students. However, from its inception, the teaching of composition was

a stratifying mechanism, which functioned to indoctrinate students into the values and thought of the dominant Eurocentric, middle-class culture:

Harvard [and other institutions modeled in its image] was to be a selection mechanism, a recruiting ground for new men for the apparatuses of state and industry, some few who might come to walk the corridors of power. (Douglas, 1976: 132)

Students from the preferred social classes were already "one-up" on immigrants and the culturally different.

Although the "new" university was open to any who could prove their academic potential, "non-traditional" students had to prove their worth by demonstrating proficiency in the written language of the academy. Composition had a social agenda--to cure cultural alienation. It was established on quasi-religious principles, to "civilize the audience for literature." As Miller (1991) tells us

[Composition] stressed upward mobility, imitation of a largely hidden American upper class, and stringent mores, as against improprieties imagined to be shunned by that upper class....  
...Abstractions like 'the curriculum,' 'progressive education,' and 'rhetoric' hide many considerations of nationalistic, colonizing, and pointedly political programs. (35)

Composition was seen as beneath literature, and so were the people who took it and taught it. There is an inherent stigma still associated with Composition. Composition's struggle to be recognized as a professionalized field of study and a science influenced its over-emphasis on surface-

level errorless generic writing. Composition was to be approached in the same manner as mathematics, for example. One takes composition to learn the principles or laws underlying "good writing." However, composition is not a hard science. It is part art, part science, something which must be developed: part talent, part practice with exercising language and the conscious imagination.

The self is not an integral ingredient in traditional composition instruction. The politics of literacy presume a suppression of the self in order to reap the benefits of literate citizenry. Members of the AAVE Culture buy into this system of "make me a good writer" because they want social mobility.<sup>3</sup> However, the kind of literacy education that may be most beneficial for the AAVE student requires a relevant cultural basis. This kind of education seeks to bring out a greater expression of what is already in the student and to enhance it by exploring various ways of knowing and being. To quote Madhubuti (1994), "[education] should be about the development of whole persons, and should begin that wholeness with an accurate understanding and assessment of our own involvement in our community, city, state, nation, and world" (28). However, generally, the

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<sup>3</sup>. Writing has been packaged in such a way that students believe they can't do/learn it, and that something is wrong with them.

multicultural composition classroom is yet an illusion. If it were reality, most AAVE students would have literacy experiences which featured cultural exchange and a higher level of self expression. For the most part, composition as it now stands, assumes that the AAVE student's culture does not have a role in their development of literacy. It does not address the AAVE student's situation.

AAVE students live in three realms of experience: "mainstream, minority, and Black cultural" (Boykin, 1986). Boykin calls this the triple quandary for African American students. The dominant literacy experiences of African American students, including college students, instills within them the idea that they have to "act white" (Fordam and Ogbu, 1985) to be right. And even when they do this, there is still the chance that their futures may not be as bright as white students who benefit from white skin privilege and advance to "different futures." As in wider society where African American communities are over represented at the bottom of the social hierarchy, such is the case in the academy. The AAVE student is initiated into the academy at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, in basic writing classrooms.

Given the low status of teachers and students of composition, it is no wonder that the intellectual importance of the study of "basic writing," marked by

Shaughnessy's (1977) study of it came late in the history of American education. Shaughnessy's analysis of 4,000 City University of New York students' entrance exams marks the beginning of basic writing as a sub-field of Composition. She investigated the logic of the errors that these students made and found that they were a natural process of students' acquisition of academic writing. Indeed Shaughnessy introduced a new way of thinking about teaching culturally different writers. She makes the following inferences about the background of basic writers:

...[t]hey have never written much, in school or out, ...they have come from families and neighborhoods where people speak other languages or variant, non-prestigious forms of English and ...while they have doubtless been sensitive to the differences between their ways of speaking and their teachers', they have never been able to sort out or develop attitudes toward the differences that did not put them in conflict, one way or another, with the key academic tasks of learning to read and write and talk in standard English. (Shaughnessy, 1987:179)

Shaughnessy (1987) was moving in the direction of dealing with the issues involving teaching writing to AAVE students in her work with basic writing, but captured mostly the surface-level of the problem. She writes (of basic writers):

First, they tend to produce, whether in impromptu or home assignments, small numbers of words with large numbers of errors (roughly from 15 to 35 errors per 300 words) that puzzle and alarm college teachers when they see them for the first

time, errors with the so-called regular features of standard English (the past tense of regular verbs, for example, or the plural inflections of nouns), misspellings that appear highly idiosyncratic, syntactic errors that reflect an unstable understanding of the conventions for marking off the boundaries of sentences and little or no acquaintance with the uses of colons, semicolons, parentheses, or quotation marks. Second, they seem to be restricted as writers, but not necessarily as speakers, to a very narrow range of syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options, which forces them into either a rudimentary style of discourse that belies their real maturity or a dense and tangled prose with which neither they nor their readers can cope. (179)

Shaughnessy's description of the "basic writer" does not acknowledge ways in which culturally different students' world views influence their rhetorical approaches or discourse strategies. An AAVE student may incorporate experiences or cultural strategies that appear to be inappropriate or unconventional to writing tasks. Further, an AAVE speaker's native oral language is more removed from the language of wider communication (LWC) than the dialects of many of their white classmates. And it is generally agreed upon that the closer one's native tongue is to the target language (LWC), the easier it is to acquire the written system. Add to this the fact that there is less stigma associated with foreign language speakers than AAVE speakers. These are aspects of writing instruction that have not received sufficient consideration.

As mentioned earlier, traditional approaches to

teaching AAVE students composition presume that students themselves need remediation; hence terms such as "diagnostic essay," "writing clinic" etc. used to be common. Although Shaughnessy was progressive in her idea of analyzing errors as a way of making sense out of the writing of culturally different students, her discussion of the speech-writing relationship echoes the remediation sentiment. What Shaughnessy (1977) offers as an example of the "basic writer's" boundedness of thought and inability to carry a point through as the essay progresses can be explained in terms of the rhetoric or discourse strategies of AAVE. In the following example a student is "writing on the question of whether college encourages students to be immature." The essay reads:

Maturity with a good college education makes better human beings. I find it very hard to believe that college encourages students to be immature. (1)

I am a perfect example because I have had only a high school education which I feel was not enough to take me through this fast moving world. I just felt I had to go to college to learn more so as to deal with the environment. (2)

We can look at the leaders of the world today, I am sure that common sence alone could not put them where they are they all had to have some college experience. (3)

In years or Centrys ago people was dying because their minds were lazy they belived in a lot of supersticion because they could not think of any other reason for what was happening to them. Now things are organized, people are made to think so that they can understand the reasons for things. (4)

I have realized that in life whatever is

worked for are more appriated than whats not worked for. I have never had life easy and I am not sorry. If many people should tell you what they have gone through to be where they are today you would be shocked.(5)

Students whos family did not prepare money for their college education grantidely should be helped to persue college. (6)

Another thing is that if a student does not wish to attend college he or she does not have to go. (7)

If we all fight for aid the government will help. (8)

Sometimes or the other the college student will find his education valuable as he encounter with the outside world. (9) (Shaughnessy 1977: 227-8, *paragraph numeration mine*)

The logic of the above essay can be explained in terms of the AAVE discourse features of indirection and narrative interspersion (Ball 1992), and topic association (Michaels qtd.. in Gee, 1991). Here is a lay out of the students' statements in LWC.

1) A good college education helps to build maturity in human beings. 2) I want to become an educated participant in the world, so I have come to college. 3) One can only achieve a minimal level of success with common sense. 4) Superstition is an outdated practice of uneducated thinkers and cannot explain the complexities of the modern world. 5) I and others like me have gone through so much to get here, if I told you all about it, you would be shocked. 6) Underprivileged people deserve to go to college. 7) College should not be mandatory. 8) If we all fight for aid the government will help. 9) The college student will find his educational experience valuable as he encounters the outside world.

The student's essay lacks transitional devices that would help the ideas hold together, but when the statements



are translated into explicit LWC structures, it is clear that the student is arguing against the proposition that a college education promotes immaturity. Paragraph two (in its original form) evinces narrative interspersion in which a writer shifts from exposition to narrative to make a point (Ball, 1992). Paragraph three evinces indirection (Ball, 1992). Topic association best describes how paragraphs four, five, seven, and eight fit into the student's argument. The implicit proposition connecting paragraphs four and five would be something like: I and others like me are in many ways like the people of centuries ago in that we do not come from backgrounds where formal education is the rule. We have lived by our wits, but we realize that we can benefit from formal education. In other words, folk knowledge vs. formal education is the overall theme.

A look at Michaels' definition of topic association as an "oral-strategy" is helpful:

[Topic associating is a] series of associated segments that may seem anecdotal in character, linked implicitly to particular topical event or theme, but with no explicit statement of an overall theme or point. (qtd.. in Gee 1991: 80)

Gee (1991) holds that although it appears that students are not making sense and "just rambling on," we must "accept the assumption that all human beings are equipped to narrate experience." Shaughnessy too says that we must look to see how students' "errors" make sense. From this view, we can

see how Shaughnessy and others have overlooked an important aspect of teaching writing, the ideological context, which manifests itself in culturally informed discursive strategies. Canagarajah's (1990) discussion concerning the confrontation between the discourse of the AAVE student and academic discourse illuminates this point:

Literacy for minority students... involves more than knowing the "standard" codes, necessary literate skills or the ability to switch language patterns as explained by current sociolinguistic and composition studies; literacy is an ideological act of negotiating between competing discourses and identities. (vii)

#### **MAJOR PEDAGOGICAL THEORIES IN COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION**

Current-traditional approaches are still used in composition instruction in spite of the fact that it is generally agreed that current-traditional approaches do not work (Stewart, 1988). Some of the major current-traditional approaches to teaching composition involve imitation of grammar, form, and structure, and focus on the error-free product. Strategies of writing programs or classrooms based in current-traditional rhetoric include "objective" testing, ability grouping, student-teacher conferencing, organization of course around writing rather than literature, focus on problems of arrangement and style rather than the writing process itself, and the research paper (Berlin, 1987:70). Underlying such approaches is meritocratic rhetoric which stresses the potential of the individual to uplift

himself/herself from his/her present condition and argues that anyone can pull him/herself "up" by the bootstraps through education and hard work. Hence the doors of the university are open to all who can demonstrate such potential (Douglas, 1976).

Emphasis is placed on students learning to write for the professions, rather than self development. Insufficient attention is paid to the culture and language that students bring with them, nor is content sufficiently emphasized. Further, current-traditional approaches operate on the assumption that only that which is scientifically deduced is real and verifiable. Hence, current-traditional rhetoric is positivistic in nature (Berlin, 1987). It restricts writers to a limited way of viewing the world. Crowley (1990) terms the kind of writing produced by such approaches as "anti-writing."

...Anti writing is serious. This sort of prose establishes no voice, selects no audience, takes no stand, makes no commitment. It can be produced by anyone anywhere, at anytime, on demand.

The students who listened to [the Harvard professors who popularized it] did so in order to learn how to speak and write English according to standards that would admit them to polite and/or professional circles. This democratic impetus carried over into current-traditional rhetoric. Current-traditional composition theory kills off individual voices. (149)

At the other end of the composition continuum is the expressionistic approach to writing instruction. Underlying

expressionistic approaches is the rhetoric of liberal culture. The ideals of liberal culture expressed the cultivation of the individual through the learning of literature, language and art. A major premise of expressionistic rhetoric is that each individual has unique creative potentialities and that truth (knowledge) ultimately lies with the individual. As Berlin (1987) informs us of expressionistic approaches:

The writing teacher must therefore encourage the student to call on metaphor, to seek in sensory experience materials that can be used in suggesting the truths of the unconscious--the private, personal, visionary world of ultimate truth. (74-75)

The writing process movement found its beginnings in expressionistic rhetoric. Writing theorists argued that past emphasis on dissecting a "finished" product was counterproductive and that more attention should be paid to the writer and the process of writing itself. Hence, expressionistic approaches encourage writers to discuss ideas and create metaphors. Such approaches are distinguished by their preoccupation with finding an authentic voice. Authentic voice is a useful concept in that at least it assumes that AAVE students have something to say. Expressionistic proponents are to be commended because they recognize the personal dimension to writing, and they recognize writing's political nature.

However, applying this concept can be problematic for well-meaning instructors. They cannot misconstrue authentic voice to mean that AAVE speaking students do not need to acquire LWC as long as they are sincerely engaged in inquiry and are in touch with their "authentic selves." The AAVE voice has an ambiguous precarious position in the mainstream. It is both despised and loved. Further, a basic organizing principle of AAVE Culture, communalism over individualism, conflicts with the principle of individualism espoused in expressionistic rhetoric. In this respect, what is ultimately good and true for the AAVE community takes precedence over what is good and true for the individual. These points cannot be shunned. Rather, AAVE students should be encouraged to explore these conditions and traditions.

Composition theory influenced by cognitive psychology aims to understand how the mind works as it is involved in the writing process. The theory holds that the mind has certain faculties that develop chronologically. Cognitive writing theorists study composing strategies involved in the writing process in order to facilitate students' problem solving abilities. One way in which writing has been studied is by asking writers to compose aloud so that the written product may be examined in conjunction with the strategies or the ways in which it was composed. Cognitive

theorists argue that experienced writers employ strategies that culminate in a satisfactory written product. For example, an experienced writer will go on to develop another idea if he or she is stuck. A beginning writer may choose another strategy such as edit what has already been written rather than move on. Cognitive theorists argue that inexperienced writers "are somehow stuck at a lower level of cognitive development, unable to engage at a 'formal-operational' level of thought..." (Horner, 1994: 32).

However, cognitive approaches are limited in that they assume that "basic writers" are "cognitively immature beginners." This approach is problematic because although students may not be familiar with college-level writing conventions, they are adults who make complex decisions in the every day real world (Horner, 1994). Where an experienced mainstream writer may move on to another idea or draw on some recognized author's published writing to advance his/her work, an AAVE writer may shift to a narrative mode (which may lead to discussion of many loosely related points); or an AAVE writer may draw on experience which is personally meaningful and culturally accepted from an AAVE perspective when he or she is stuck. This alerts us to the fact that cognitive approaches are problematic because they universalize the psychology of learning. In other words, cultural difference is not factored into the

analysis of rhetorical approaches to problem solving. Students simply have not reached a sufficient level of cognitive development if they have not conceptualized or solved a problem in a conventional manner (Bizzell, 1982). Again, the cognitive model of writing theory implicates cultural difference as deficit and identifies itself as positivistic.

Writing theories based on epistemic and borderlands rhetoric appear to be more applicable to the needs of the AAVE student than early traditional approaches. Epistemic approaches see language at the core of truth-seeking. Truth is created through the interaction of the rhetorical elements: interlocutor, audience, reality and language. "Writing instruction [is] based on language itself rather than social or audience-reaction elements" (Murphy, 1990). Epistemic rhetoric recognizes that knowledge is relative to different discourse communities and that there are diverse world views (Berlin, 1987: 170). Borderlands rhetoric has as its emphasis the political and ethical relations involved in acquiring academic literacy. Horner (1994) explains:

This does not mean we ignore points of difference, problems we or other readers have with their writing. It means rather that both teachers and students need to focus on such points of contact, the borders where different and shifting sets of conventions conflict, and to practice negotiating those differences. (44)

The key to approaches based in both epistemic and borderlands writing theory is implementing strategies that allow students opportunities to get their alternative language and views on the page. Once this is accomplished students may begin to explore how their language has been employed effectively by their forerunners. This is the area most problematic for teachers who sincerely want to promote liberatory writing in the classroom. They want to let students be Black and write and right, but they may not have the necessary training, such as a working knowledge of AAVE Culture and language, to facilitate liberatory writing. Any approach which does not seek to facilitate liberatory writing is detrimental as it perpetuates cultural genocide.

Besides the fact that it has only been within the past two decades that rhetorical and pedagogical conceptions have begun to be broadened to facilitate multicultural literacy instruction, there are other factors which are pertinent to African American college students' unequal literacy achievement (as compared to their white peers). The following are offered by Engs (1987): "racism," "lack of societal rewards for completing school," and "the alienating effect of schools." Ogbu (1982) explains inequality of literacy acquisition in terms of a "castelike" minority. Minorities who are not "castelike" come to this country (e.g. Jews and Mormons) and learn to read, write, and



compute in the same system as African American students. So something other than "minority" status must be the problem. Ogbu finds that African American education was never geared toward qualifying African Americans for "desirable" positions in society, but menial ones. He cites the African American struggle for education, conflict and mistrust of institutions, job ceiling, and disregard for academic efforts as reasons why African Americans often choose survival strategies that do not require them to reject their culture or their language and which put them at odds with school culture. Ogbu rejects theories which explain African American literacy lag in terms of cultural differences (oral vs. literate culture). Ogbu's research points to the fact that many African American students see mainstream institutions as oppressive vehicles used to advance cultural supremacy.

The preceding historical look at the background of Composition, the literacy experiences of African American students and the rhetorics and ideologies that underlie American composition pedagogy illuminates the problems that surround traditional conceptions of literacy and instruction for AAVE students. A pedagogy needs to be devised that takes into account the social and political aspects of literacy for AAVE students. Students should have access to a critical literacy, which addresses the historical, social,

ideological, and cultural aspects of their being. Asante's (1991a) words effectively sum up the situation:

The fact that an African American or an Hispanic person--in order to master the white cultural information--has had to experience the death of his or her own culture does not register with most [instructors]. The true "centric" curriculum seeks for the African, Asian, and Hispanic [student] the same kind of experience that is provided for the white [student]. (29)

#### **RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY**

Literacy is a prerequisite for most professional careers and entrepreneurship in our industrialized, highly technical society. Even most non-professional jobs require the ability to read and write instructions, rules, and policies. The ability to write well helps us to learn about complex ideas and experiences as well as to share with others our unique conceptualization of ideas and experiences.

While written literacy may be useful in everyday life, it is definitely a necessity for students who wish to succeed in the university. With many colleges and universities committed to writing across the curriculum, college students in all fields must have a command of academic discourse. Yet the written literacy acquisition of students from the AAVE culture is not on par with that of students from the dominant culture (Applebee et. Al. 1986, 1990; Chapman, 1994). For instance, AAVE students are still

placed disproportionately in college-level remedial writing courses (Rose 1989). Further, most studies show that African Americans have one of the lowest college completion rates of ethnic "minority" groups (Annual status report on minorities in higher education, 1992). While the first National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) writing study showed that African American students had improved twice as much as their white counterparts, still African American students' scores were not on par with those of white students as reported in the most recent NAEP report (Smitherman, 1994).

African Centered pedagogy may help us to bridge the well-known cultural gap that exists in educational settings (Labov, 1972; Ogbu, 1994), particularly in English composition classrooms (Shaughnessy, 1977; Fox, 1990; Heath, 1993; Moss & Walters, 1993; Campbell, 1994). An African Centered pedagogy is needed in composition to make students aware of the talents they already have and to maintain the culture that nurtured them. This study hopes to aid in reversing the trend of African American students "writing from the margins."

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed here describes the cultural context of AAVE discursive strategies and their appearance in African American students' writing. In so doing, these studies illuminate the sites of contestation in AAVE students' literacy practices.

Noonan-Wagner (1981) was influenced by Smitherman's (1977) suggestion that the Black church plays an important role in the linguistic socialization of AAVE speaking students. According to Smitherman, (as cited in Noonan-Wagner, p. 6) "it is within the [B]lack church that traditional [B]lack folk ... create much of their reality which includes the preservation and the passing on of Africanized idioms, proverbs, customs and attitudes." This leads Noonan-Wagner to the following hypothesis:

In a college-level, basic skills English classroom, [B]lack writers tend to use discourse features suggestive of the rhetoric of the [B]lack preacher. (6)

Seven experienced writing teachers were asked to identify the race of writers (Black/ white), to note specific reasons for the racial identification, and give examples from the essays to support their choices. Based on teacher-raters' examinations of the student papers, Noonan-Wagner found the following features to be associated with African

American students' texts: "free association as a generative principle, redundancy, use of quotes, use of proverbs and cliches, reference to the Bible, sermonizing, moralizing, and word choice" (15). The teacher raters identified the correct race of the writer 80% of the time.

These results led Noonan-Wagner to another question, "Is the written discourse of our [B]lack students consistently different in the above respects from that of our white students?" This time six teacher raters were given a list of features and examples and asked to identify those features in 20 randomly selected essays by 10 Black and 10 white students. The teacher judges were not told the race of the writers. Noonan-Wagner found that outstanding differences between the African and European American students were in "references to the Bible, redundancy, sermonizing and/or moralizing, use of quotations, and word choice" (18). Although the white students used some of the same AAVE features, the African American use was significantly higher. Noonan-Wagner attributes AAVE students' higher usage of these patterns to the Black church.

Visor's (1987) study illustrates that cultural contextualization features (CCF) are strategies AAVE speaking students acquire through socialization in the AAVE Oral Tradition. Visor's research questions were:

- A. Do black students from the [AAVE] oral culture who have undergone 12-13 years of schooling display cultural contextualization in their writing when they come to college?
- B. Is cultural contextualization the primary source of writing difficulties for students from the [AAVE] Oral Tradition?
- C. If so, what ameliorative approaches are suggested? (26)

Visor analyzed the writing and speech of her students for AAVE Oral Tradition features. The features that she observed in their speech and writing had been characterized in the literature pejoratively as unsupported assumptions, disconnected ideas, unexplicated examples, and truncated logic. However, from the vantage point of the AAVE Oral Tradition, the students used repetition, indirection, shared knowledge, and fraternity of perspective.

To explain the observed phenomena, Visor frames her findings in the context of Smitherman's (1977) connection of AAVE use to the African world view. Visor writes:

These features arise out of a holistic perspective on the world which assumes the reader shares the world view of the writer and therefore already understands the assumptions, connections, explications, and logic. And it is this world view which is the primary source of writing difficulties for students from the [AAVE] oral tradition. (190)

Visor concludes that for AAVE students the problem lies in the contradiction between the "cultural perceptions and practices these students bring to the academy and the cultural perceptions and practices they meet there" (189).

Ball's pilot study (1991) investigated the use of oral features in adolescent students' informal written and oral expository texts. She found that AAVE speaking students insert narrative into written expository texts and sometimes use it to carry the main point. This is not a "standard" rhetorical device. Ball also identified a circumlocutory pattern in the writing. She describes circumlocution as a series of topics that are implicitly linked to a main theme but that seem illogical and pointless to speakers of LWC.

In a different but related study [both part of her dissertation work], Ball (1991) found that AAVE students preferred orally based patterns in their writing. After students were trained to recognize two LWC patterns of text organization and two vernacular based organizational patterns, students preferred the vernacular based organization patterns, namely narrative interspersion and circumlocution, in both academic and conversational tasks. Ball's work points to the need for "bridges between informal language practices and more literate-like, academic discourse" (187-188).

Following Bakhtin's (1981) proposition that content and form are inseparable and that the sociological and ideological aspects of language must be factored into discourse analyses, Richardson (1993a) argued that AAVE-oriented students' meaning is misunderstood by instructors

because the texts are read through the lens of the "standard" rhetorical paradigm. One particular student's text was chosen for analysis because it was obvious to the researcher that this text displayed Black discursive features. It was offered along with two papers written in the LWC discourse style in a session on grading student texts in a seminar for Composition Teaching Assistants (TAs). Almost all of the TAs graded the paper exhibiting the Black features lower than the other two papers.

In order to explore the degree to which cultural values influence paradigm development and reading of texts, Richardson (1993a) analyzed the student's text using two paradigms: 1) a standard academic analysis; and 2) Knowles-Borishade's (1991) "paradigm of African orature."

According to Richardson (1993a) the "standard" academic analysis paid particular attention to the student's level of facility with LWC rhetorical patterns. The text was evaluated in terms of elements associated with Current-traditional Rhetoric, including logical development and coherence of argument evinced by introductory statements of the main point(s) to be discussed in the essay and identifiable thesis, body paragraphs linked by logical transitions, and conclusion. This reading revealed the essay to be disjointed, leaving macro metaphors in the introduction not fully exploited throughout the body of the



text.

The second reading of the same student's text employed an analysis guided by the "paradigm of African Orature." In this paradigm, preference is given to the rhetor's facility with "nommo"--the power of the word--interaction with audience through "caller plus chorus," and language use aimed at invoking the shared text of the Black Experience. The Afrocentric reading uncovered the use of testifying, where the student-author's response to a primary author's text underscored the righteousness of what the primary author said by recounting how the same phenomenon had occurred in the student-author's life, but with her own personal circumstances. Another feature uncovered by the Afrocentric reading was repetition, where the student-author called attention to important concepts through repeating them. Double voicedness was one of the most interesting features that surfaced through the Afrocentric reading. Double voicedness occurred when the student-writer employed culturally ideographic language, that is language that invoked an historical consciousness of events that are particular to the Black Experience although the same terms connote a different meaning to speakers of LWC. An example is "(African American) slavery." To a member of one of the standard English speaking communities this utterance could be synonymous with "slave trade." From an African American

perspective, this utterance is more in line with terms such as "genocide" or "holocaust." Hence, the historical, ideological, and sociological information which one associates with an utterance influences its meaning. That is, a person's experience and language orientation influences the ways in which he or she describes the world. The "paradigm of African Orature" revealed a perspective that was unattainable through the lens of the standard paradigm.

Campbell's (1993) ethnographic description of five male AAVE speaking college students deals with the interaction between literacy experiences (home and school) and rhetorical posturing in written texts. All five of the students were in Ohio State's retention program for students who "ranked lowest on verbal and quantitative sections of the ACT/SAT and on a placement essay." Campbell observed these students and analyzed their writing (journals and formal essays) when he worked as their tutor in a Basic English Composition class. He also obtained speech samples from tutoring sessions and from informal settings over the course of approximately five months. Campbell observed that these students were in fact not cognitively deficient as might be presumed, but that they found school to be "boring," and they had no confidence in themselves as writers. He explicated the students' texts for AAVE

discourse/rhetorical patterns and AAVE values and found that the texts abound with discursive and rhetorical patterns derived from AAVE culture. Campbell's work demonstrates the complexities in the college experience of AAVE students as they negotiate the demands of the academy while striving to retain their sense of themselves.

The researchers reviewed thus far were primarily concerned with above sentence-level aspects of AAVE students' writing. All concluded that the best practices should recognize and incorporate students' language use into instruction. To be effective, writing pedagogy should be derived from theories grounded in African American Language and Culture. Such theories had been suggested over twenty years ago, but were not then fully understood (Baxter & Reed et. al. 1973). They are beginning to resurface (Taylor 1991).

Baxter & Reed's curriculum consisted of instruction in the historical development of AAVE, contrastive analysis of the grammatical systems of AAVE and LWC, rhetorical sensibility, analysis of the speaking styles of African American communities and ways these styles contrast with written academic English, and the values associated with AAVE Culture and those of the dominant culture as reflected in language use. Baxter and Reed contended that the AAVE resource could be used as a scaffold for academic discourse.

This instructional approach included use of African American literature, including the canonical, oral, folk, musical (sound and textual), and pieces from Black popular media. Another innovative aspect of the program was its use of computer assisted instruction in the composing process and development of LWC. The curriculum also featured grammatical drill, textual analysis, and training in the modes of rhetoric.

According to Dr. Carol Reed (1996), researcher with the City University of New York SEEK program, the approach was ESL ([standard] English as a second language). The acronym SEEK stands for (S)earch for (E)ducation and (E)levation through (K)nowledge. The advantage of this approach was that students were credited for bringing a resource to the learning environment, and their language and culture was studied as a subject of worth. Reed notes that one of the myths held by teachers of AAVE speaking students is that LWC grammar is too hard for African American students to understand so they just don't teach it, hoping that their students will pick it up. Reed thinks that English teachers should be trained to teach LWC as a language in their preparation as instructors.

Starting in 1969, the SEEK program applied for and received five year funding, taking the program through the mid seventies. The text and teacher's manual which came out

of the extremely capable instructors' years of trial/error/success with program materials could not find a publisher. Dr. Reed's (1996) personal opinion is that the book could not find a publisher because of the controversy surrounding the term "Black" in those days. Baxter & Reed's approach appears by far the most encompassing for newcomers to the academy [to my knowledge].

Taylor (1991) developed an approach to teaching writing to AAVE students which was grounded in a bidialectal philosophy. She focused on acknowledgment of AAVE as a legitimate dialect, ethnosensitivity, trust building, the reduction of AAVE surface features in student writing, and attention to surface feature differences between AAVE and LWC. Taylor's goals were:

[1] ...to demonstrate the possibility of black students' achievement in a predominantly white college environment.

[2] ... to provide writing teachers, support professionals, and students with a tentative version of applicable techniques and attitudinal adjustments that proved to be successful enough to make a difference and lead to academic success rather than failure.

[3]...to convince ...readers of the need for further exploration and expansion of my tentative approaches. (XII)

Taylor's bidialectal approach consists of identifying her students' use of AAVE in their writing, pattern practice drills, teaching students to recognize "high interference domains," "audio-lingual" repetition of LWC constructions, and translation of literary passages from AAVE to LWC.

Taylor is to be commended for her endeavors to recognize the "value differentials" and complexities that exist between Black Language and Culture and the dominant culture. However, there is no evidence in Taylor's study that points to the promotion of her students' centeredness in their own culture. Her acknowledgment of AAVE as a legitimate "dialect" is not backed up with classroom opportunities for her students to experiment with and show their competence in AAVE. For this reason, Taylor's study/ attempt was not fully bidialectal.

In summary, the research conducted on AAVE students in composition classes explains how AAVE is used in academia. Baxter & Reed's approach to teaching composition appears to be the most relevant, based on the theoretical rationale underpinning its design. Any pedagogical approach to composition which seeks to address cultural differences should take into account cultural knowledge and language use. Baxter and Reed's pedagogy was rooted in theories of Afrocentricity, although the term had not yet been coined.

## Chapter 3

### **CAN YOU BE BLACK AND WRITE AND RIGHT?**

I would like to define myself in conjunction with AAVE and discuss some features of AAVE discourse/rhetorical patterns. One of the main goals of this chapter is to discuss alternative assessment of AAVE patterns in student texts and to offer suggestions about how we might break the cycle of the violence of standard literacy practices.

### **WHO AM I?/ WHAT IS AAVE RHETORIC AND DISCOURSE STYLE?**

I am a product of the AAVE Oral Tradition. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, attending the Cleveland Public Schools. My parents were working-class people. Some of my neighbors, in fact, most of them, were under-working class, meaning that they may have been on welfare or did whatever kind of hustle they could to survive and keep their families together. I tell you this because I want you to know that I am representing these kinds of students in your classrooms. I don't want to front like I was better educated or of another class, and therefore did not speak and live the vernacular life. I did, and in many ways I still do. I like to define myself in the tradition of the language and the Black Experience because the two are one.

I think it is important for people to see me as a student of the vernacular culture, and I think it is

important for people to know that AAVE Culture is more than systematic grammar, syntax, and a particular way of expressing ideas. It is a way of being in the world. People usually overlook this major aspect of language. Language and culture are inseparable.

AAVE is a direct result of African-European contact on the shores of West Africa and in what became the United States of America. The experience of subordination and dominance has implanted double consciousness into the very core of African American being. Historically speaking, Africans had to become proficient in English just to survive. They had to prove that they had more use than just to be and to remain "ignorant niggers," the creation of slavers. Smitherman (1977) says that:

[t]he push-pull momentum is evidenced in the historical development of Black English in the push toward Americanization of Black English counterbalanced by the pull of retaining its Africanization.... ... White America has insisted upon White English as the price of admission into its economic and social mainstream. (11-12)

By the same token, whether or not AAVE students have the same experiences as white middle-class students (the norming group for the American educational model), they must come to the institutions speaking or writing right (or writing white). The game still has not changed. In our nation's beginning, cultural difference was used to justify inhumane treatment, and nowadays it is used to justify inequality,



and cultural difference is at the very core of the politics of education and literacy.

The fact of the matter is that African Americans have retained much of their Africanness in spite of slavery. The African world view which is a part of AAVE Culture opposes the dominant European world view in fundamental ways. African peoples view ideas and phenomena holistically, while Euro-peoples view ideas or phenomena analytically and hierarchically (Baldwin & Hopkins, 1990). These fundamentally different aspects of world view encompass other facets of reality, such as orientation to time, nature, family life, spirituality and more. But the focus here is on the relationship between language use and reality.

Morgan (1993) has described AAVE as a "counter language." She says that Black English began as a "conscious attempt on the part of [enslaved Africans] and their descendants to represent an alternative reality through a communication system based on ambiguity, irony, and satire." Hence, Africanized English reflects the Black Experience. In its most sophisticated uses, Africanized English resists white ways of knowing and being, and speaking about those ways of knowing and being. This language carries the beliefs, values, and ideology of its speakers. Black language creates meaning differently

because of the ideology embedded in the language and the way that the discourse may be structured.

### **FEATURES UNDER CONSIDERATION**

Smitherman (1977) explained the ways in which much of African American verbal style is acquired from the folk traditions of the Black church. As discussed in the previous chapter, there is a growing body of research which investigates the degree to which AAVE Oral Tradition features influence the Black discursive and rhetorical patterns that may arise in AAVE speaking students' texts (Noonan-Wagner 1987; Troutman-Robinson 1987; Ball 1992; Redd 1993; Richardson 1993a; Campbell 1993; Smitherman 1994). Most of these scholars find that features such as "narrative sequencing," "repetition," "topic association (as opposed to the development of one point in speech or writing)," "field dependency/lack of distance from events," and others are associated with the Black Church, Black culture and the Traditional African World View.

Three aspects of the AAVE oral tradition in students' texts to be analyzed here are "signification," "narrative sequencing," and "testifying." The student texts were gleaned from a freshman composition course at Cleveland State University (CSU) where I taught as part of my training as a teacher of composition. The CSU texts were used in a

subsequent study which explored instructor evaluation of AAVE discourse (Richardson 1993b). The findings of that study are reported here to inform my estimation of conventional rating practices. I obtained my idea for the "nondiagnostic"<sup>4</sup> assignment from a course in which I was enrolled for composition teaching assistants at CSU. Below is the "nondiagnostic" essay prompt and the assignment I used for the freshman English course at CSU. It was common practice that students be required to take the writing lab in conjunction with the freshman course if their performance on the "nondiagnostic" assignment did not signal their familiarity with received rhetorical approaches. (All of the students dreaded such a fate because they [correctly] perceived that they were stigmatized by writing lab placement.)

Here is the "nondiagnostic" essay assignment for that CSU freshman English course:

#### Diagnostic Essay--Freshman English

For this essay the knowledge of essay writing you have acquired in previous writing classes or high school will be of most help to you. Please feel free to freewrite, use outlines, or use any other prewriting or organizational technique which will help you achieve a well thought out conscientiously devised piece of writing.

---

4

The term "nondiagnostic" is employed rather than diagnostic to avoid the remediation sentiment so characteristic of traditional composition theory.

Construct an essay of at least two pages using the following quote:

"Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making."

--John Milton

The papers were to be evaluated following criteria like that of the evaluation sheet below.

#### Evaluation Sheet

##### **Score**

4     Elaborated. Students providing elaborated responses went beyond the essential, reflecting a higher level of coherence and providing more detail to support the points made.

3     Adequate. Students providing adequate responses included the information and ideas necessary to accomplish the underlying task and were considered likely to be effective in achieving the desired purpose.

2     Minimal. Students writing at the minimal level recognized some or all of the elements needed to complete the task but did not manage these elements needed well enough to assure that the purpose of the task would be achieved.

1     Unsatisfactory. Students who wrote papers judged as unsatisfactory provided very abbreviated, circular, or disjointed responses that did not even begin to address the writing task.

The evaluation sheet is a variation of the rubric used by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) called the primary trait scale (Smitherman, 1994: 88). Although the above evaluation sheet is not the exact one that I used in the CSU course, I use it here because it is the same one

I used in the study of instructor evaluation of AAVE discourse patterns reported here, entitled "Paradigms and Pedagogy" (Richardson, 1993b). I invite the reader to evaluate the papers and ponder your reasons for assigning the score that you give.

### **Paper I**

The quote by John Milton reminds me of a theory of cognitive development. In cognitive development, before a person can learn something, interest must be developed and an idea must be recognized as something that is either similar or different. In other words, a person analyzes an idea to find out what it is made of. Uniformed opinions are not knowledge. After a person makes sense of an idea or has had a chance to look at it from all possible angles, then it becomes a part of the person's knowledge base. Usually a person has an opinion about something before exploring an idea or a topic. After arguing and writing or analyzing, a person usually has a better opinion because it is more well thought out.

In order to understand an idea a person must analyze it. This corresponds to Milton's arguing. Arguing means looking at all the parts that make up an idea. When arguing, it is good to write down all of the parts of an idea. In this way, a person can visualize an idea more clearly and see how it fits in with what is already known. It is like all of the parts of an idea are sitting there in view in order to figure out how they fit together or do not fit together. But if a person only looks at one part of an idea or topic, the information is limited.

If we have interest and an opinion we must argue and write or analyze to see what the idea is made of. Therefore, like Milton said: "opinion in good men, is but knowledge in the making."

**A CONVENTIONAL EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT OF PAPER I**

The introduction sets the audience up for an analogy between the student's interpretation of the Milton quote and cognitive development. We can understand why the writer moves to an explanation of "analysis" and "arguing" in the first body paragraph. We get the feeling that the student-author is going to move through each aspect of cognitive development and compare it to the author's interpretation of the ideas in Milton's quote; however, although the writer's discourse evidences an interesting condensed version of the analogy between cognitive development and the writer's interpretation of the Milton quote, the writer seems to have abandoned the analogy, leaving the audience to fend for itself. The author rather moves to a summarizing concluding paragraph. The paper is reminiscent of Labov's (1972) example of standard loquaciousness in which a speaker (or writer) substitutes verbosity for depth and content.

Given the "Evaluation Sheet" like the one above and those that many of us have to work with, our training as writing instructors, and the fact that the writer did employ a fresh approach to the topic, conventional standards bind most instructors to score **Paper I** somewhere between "4" and "3" especially because the writer adheres to language of wider communication (LWC) grammar, and there are no glaring

departures from academic style. Seven out of nine college writing instructors scored the paper "3" or "4" in the AAVE discourse patterns study (Richardson, 1993b).

## **Paper II**

Milton's quote reminds me of the writing process. In the writing process, a person writes every possible issue on a topic down in order to learn about it. In the writing process this is called arguing or exploring an issue. In the beginning of the process, the writer has an opinion. After finding out all of the information on a topic, the writer has a better opinion because it contains truth not just a personal belief.

It takes lots of practice to become an efficient writer. Through practicing writing and thinking about issues one can effectively communicate one's ideas. Good writing persuades someone to believe what you are saying is true. The writing process involves changing opinions and looking at an argument from another point of view.

A writer does this so that readers will believe that the writing is well thought out. Opinions are like birthdays everybody's got one. As Milton said, "opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making."

## **A CONVENTIONAL EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT OF PAPER II**

The introduction sets the reader up for discussion of the similarities between the writing process and the elements of the Milton quote. The writer discusses methods that efficient/good writers use--practicing writing and thinking and looking at ideas from alternate viewpoints. The concluding paragraph tells the reader why writers must use these methods. The paper moves to closure with a colloquial aphorism--"Opinions are like birthdays

everybody's got one." Finally, the paper ends with a quote from Milton which approximates to: good men don't view opinions as fact, but as a step toward discovery of fact. Upon first reading paper II, an instructor may be inclined to suggest that the writer should have referred to Milton more throughout the discussion to bang the similarity between the writing process and the Milton quote. Further, there is one run-on sentence located within the colloquial aphorism.

What score does the "Evaluation Sheet" allow you to assign to paper II? Conventional standards dictate somewhere between a "3" and "2," especially because of the colloquialism which signals a shift in tone from formal objective prose to informal conversational tone. In the AAVE discourse patterns study nine instructors were split evenly between "3's" and "2's," with one instructor giving the paper a "1."

Even though **Paper II** receives lower evaluation, the lower evaluation may be due to unfamiliarity with integral AAVE rhetorical features. Paper II evinces signifying. Let me explain. Gates' (1988) definition of signifying helps us to understand how the student is using language. Gates says that African Americans distinguish themselves from other speakers of the English language by Signifying. In the



### AAVE Oral Tradition of Signifying:

The very meaning of meaning is being questioned by a literal critique of white meaning. (Gates 1988:46)

When words are used in this way, they can have at least two levels of meaning, one that is spoken, other(s) that is/are unarticulated. The speech act of signifying as described by Smitherman (1977) refers to speakers putting each other down (or up) for fun, or making indirect points as behavior correctives. What I am calling signifying here is the use of indirection to make a point in which a familiar AAVE maxim is invoked by a writer (speaker) to express a commonly held belief (mother wit/experiential knowledge), although the maxim applies only metaphorically to the situation at hand. The writer applies the maxim to a rhetorical situation in which the readers do not share the same background of the writer and thus miss the connection that the writer is trying to make. As we can see, the student-author is striving for objective academic prose: the use of "one's." However, the student shifts to a personal point of view in the statement: "opinions are like birthdays everybody's got one." This usage is not usually readily comprehensible to non AAVE members. In AAVE communities, similar phrases are used when a speaker is talking about a subject about which she does not have all of the information or facts straight. As the writer has pointed out, "writing

is supposed to hold one's interest, entertain, or persuade someone to believe what you are saying is true." In AAVE contexts a speaker may be questioned by a listener for talking about a subject without having all the facts; he may be told to keep his opinions to himself. Hence, "opinions are like \_ \_ \_ holes, everybody's got one." We see, in the text, the student shifting between AAVE and academic styles. The student is hoping that the audience will infer the connection between this contextual formula in the AAVE community and the present writing situation. The student knows that the absence of fact and uninteresting use of language or ideas in writing results in uninformed opinions or uninteresting writing but demonstrates this indirectly. She applies an AAVE form of signifying to a rhetorical context in which it is not expected, giving her essay an AAVE-oriented perspective.

### **Paper III**

Like John Milton said, "much arguing and much writing" lead to learning. But opinion is not good unless it is held by a good man.

I agree with Milton because if a man is not willing to argue and write about something he believes in, then he obviously does not know enough about it. Or, if he does know about it, his argument is so weak or evil that no one will be persuaded to his beliefs.

A good man will take the time to explain his beliefs; but a bad man will try to rush through explanations so he can trick someone. It's just like one time a Jehovah's Witness came to our house. This lady was trying to gather her

following by putting other religions down. My mother told her what our family believed in and was trying to show her in the Bible the reasons for our beliefs. Instead of the Jehovah's Witness lady doing the same as my mother, she was talking fast like a traveling sales man. She never took the time to write down or explain their beliefs carefully. As far as I'm concerned, if you can't show me something in black and white, you can keep it!

### **A CONVENTIONAL EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT OF PAPER III**

The introductory statement gives us an idea of the writer's stance: good men hold good opinions. In the second paragraph, the student is still in the objective/academic mode even though there is the use of "I." The final paragraph concretizes the writer's abstraction, a good man will take time to explain...;" "a bad man will try to rush..." with the story. This final paragraph tells a story about the family's encounter with the Jehovah's Witnesses and ends with an aphorism. The last sentence serves as commentary on the story about the Jehovah's Witnesses and on the writer's understanding of the Milton quote.

If one follows typical composition text criteria, this paper would be generally graded somewhere between 3 and 1 especially because the writer's tone is informal although the writing adheres to grammatical conventions of LWC. In my AAVE discourse study, (Richardson 1993b), this paper received two 3's, three 2's, and four 1's.

The AAVE discourse paradigm shows that **Paper III**

employs narrative sequencing and testifying. Smitherman's (1977) definition of narrative sequencing is very helpful:

The story element is so strong in [B]lack communicative dynamics that it pervades general everyday conversation. An ordinary inquiry is likely to elicit an extended narrative response where the abstract point or general message will be couched in concrete story form.... The Black English speaker thus simultaneously conveys the facts and his or her personal sociopsychological perspective on the facts. (161)

In this particular student's interpretation of the Milton quote, there is a shift to narrative to carry the main point. The narrative occurs in the student-author's discursive reenactment of the family's encounter with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Also, the student's interpretation is filtered through values of Black culture. So, we can see this narrative as a form of testifyin. Again, we must turn to Smitherman (1977):

To testify is to tell the truth through 'story.' In the sacred context, the subject of testifying includes such matters as visions, prophetic experiences, the experience of being saved, and testimony to the power and goodness of God. (150)

In this case the testifying is sacred because the writer refers to religious training. In other words, the writer anticipates that the reader has a reverence for pious writers. As readers we should (from the writer's perspective) respect the fact that the writer uses a religious story which demonstrates the writer's Biblical literacy and reliance on The Word.

According to traditional standards, Paper I earns the highest grade because it adheres more to standard rhetorical paradigms. The paper begins with the idea of relating the quote to cognitive development and then pursues that idea (though in a shallow way) throughout the text. After all, isn't that what an essay is supposed to do? One meaning of the term "essay" as defined by the compact OED (1987) is:

A composition of moderate length on any particular subject; originally implying want of finish, 'an irregular undigested piece' (J), but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style, though limited in range. (896)

The earlier part of this definition was adapted from Samuel Johnson's dictionary. It appears that Johnson was ahead of his time in that his definition more aptly describes the writing of students whose language use conflicts with the form now known as the academic essay. As the latter part of the definition notes, the academic essay is more "limited in range," as is Paper I. Sanborn's (1992) definition of the academic essay describes that range:

The academic essay is not a vehicle for exploring ideas and making knowledge; it is a vehicle for presenting formed ideas, a didactic, authoritative model rather than an interactive form. (143)

The work of sociolinguists and educational theorists has helped to improve the reception of AAVE writers and their productions. Smitherman's work (1994) in this area is noteworthy in this respect. In her NAEP (National

Assessment for Educational Progress) study, which analyzed the writing of seventeen year olds, Smitherman found that AAVE speakers whose writing exhibited a discernably Black discourse style received higher ratings. Her list of features adds another dimension to those discussed in the papers above.

1. Rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language. Example: "Darkness is like a cage in black around me, shutting me off from the rest of the world."
2. Reference to color-race-ethnicity (that is, when topic does not call for it). Example: "I don't get in trouble at school or have any problems with people picking on me I am nice to every one no matter what color or sex."
3. Use of proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses. Example: "People might have shut me off from the world cause of a mistake, crime, or sin.... Judge not others, for you to will have your day to be judge."
4. Sermonic tone reminiscent of traditional Black Church rhetoric, especially in vocabulary, imagery, metaphor. Example: " I feel like I'm suffering from being with world. There no lights, food, water, bed and clothes for me to put on. I'm frighten, scared of what might happened if no one finds me. But I pray and pray until they do find me."
5. Direct address-conversational tone. Example: "I think you should use the money for the railroad track.... it could fall of the tracks and kill someone on the train and that is very dangerius. Don't you think so. Please change your mind and pick the railroad tracks. For the People change your mind and pick the railroad tracks. For the People safety O.K." [literacized form of call-response]
6. Cultural references. Example: "How about slipping me some chitterlings in tonite."
7. Ethnolinguistic idioms. Example: "...a fight has broke loose"; "It would run me crazy...."

8. Verbal inventiveness, unique nomenclature.  
Example: "[The settlers] were pioneerific"; "[The box] has an eye look-out."

9. Cultural values-community consciousness.  
Expressions of concern for development of African Americans; concern for welfare of entire community, not just individuals....

10. Field dependency. Involvement with and immersion in events and situations; personalizing phenomena; lack of distance from topics and subjects.

Employment of Black language devices does not mean that AAVE students are not capable of constructing a piece of writing which contains introduction, identifiable thesis, body paragraphs and conclusion; rather, AAVE students may use language in ways that are not acknowledged by writing instructors as valid ways of demonstrating knowledge. More often than not both the students and the teachers are unaware of AAVE discourse/rhetorical patterns in the writing. Usually when such devices are used, essays are referred to as non-conventional at best, or incoherent at worst. The rhetorical patterns and ideological stances these patterns express in terms of their employment in AAVE speaking students' texts is at the core of the African Centered approach to composition.

Throughout kindergarten-college schooling, students are increasingly evaluated by their adherence to academic discourse. They are expected to know the conventions, and if they don't, they are treated as remedial students, as

though something is wrong with them (Rose 1989). That just simply is not a good place to start. In fact, Smitherman (1995) says in her retrospective on the "Student's right to their own language" that:

In spite of recently reported gains in Black student writing, chronicled by the NAEP and higher scores on the SAT, the rate of functional illiteracy and drop-outs among America's underclass is moving faster than the Concorde. A genuine recognition of [AAVE] students' culture and language is desperately needed if we as a profession are to play some part in stemming this national trend. (25)

Writing teachers may not realize that students are operating within the realm of the AAVE Oral Tradition. It may be helpful if we can begin to recognize form and content as one. Bakhtin (1981) argues that discourse is a living social phenomenon which is shaped by the context from which it occurs. Unfamiliarity with the social aspect of language perpetuates narrowly informed interpretation and assessment of AAVE student writing.

We must develop ways of incorporating the students' cultural literacy experience with that needed to enhance their futures, and to succeed in a society where only one kind of literacy is valued. Composition experts are beginning to work out transcultural (Gilyard, forthcoming), multicultural (Miller, forthcoming), and Afrocentric/multicultural (Evans, forthcoming) writing classrooms.



Grading should not be used punitively against AAVE writers. Clearly the CSU freshman English papers revealing the AAVE perspective evinced substance and ideas that the students related to their interpretation of Milton. Yet when the ideas and the experience that those ideas represent are unfamiliar or not within the instructors' experiential base, they are usually not well received.

One way to bridge this cultural gap may be to describe the ways in which students are using language in their texts. What I believe we should do is allow students to explore and experiment with the AAVE Oral Tradition to expand the students' repertoire of available styles. The African Centered approach to Composition allows students to do such exploration. The African Centered curriculum develops within students a rhetorical sensibility by having them write for real Black audiences and of course a real academic audience (myself). The curriculum is based in theories of bidialectalism and biculturalism. It is assumed that there is power in Black expression. The curriculum invites students to experiment with ways of trying to retain the Black voice and make their prose accessible to non AAVE members.

It is hoped that the experimentation in this research will help students as well as their instructors to recognize and acknowledge AAVE styles as extensions of students'

cultural orientation. Exploration of diverse linguistic orientations and how these influence textual creation may provide an additional method of scaffolding students to academic styles in a way that does not lock instructors into evaluating (AAVE) students' cultures. The African Centered curriculum has been conceived in a way that allows students to discern, appreciate, and master diverse styles. Students can be Black and write and right. Thinking along these lines may enable us to halt the perpetuation of the violence of standard literacy practices.

## Chapter 4

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed approach is grounded in five theoretical traditions: 1) The theory of Afrocentricity (Asante 1990); 2) Giroux' (1991) theory of politicizing literacy and difference; 3) Fox's (1992) theory of "position"; 4) Gates' (1988) theory of "Signifyin(g); and 5) Baxter and Reed's (1973) bi-dialectal/contrastive approach to teaching academic writing.

Asante's (1990) theory of Afrocentricity is the basis of the proposed composition curriculum. Afrocentricity is an inclusive approach to phenomena which encourages knowledge and centeredness of self. A pedagogy based on this view of reality seeks to fuse the self and the subject of study, in this case literacy education, acknowledging self and subject as inseparable. Education for African American students is predicated on the assumption that one is at once subject and agent of her experience. From this perspective, an African American students' literacy education should involve her experience and be experienced by her.

Literacy acquisition is not a set of skills to be mastered. It is a looking inward into one's own thought and cultural/language patterns and history, while looking

outward into the world's, seeking to intervene in one's own context. The student of African descent should not be dislocated so that she has to reinvent herself in order to negotiate new information. Rather, the student develops from her own cultural position, so that new information can be effectively organized. Asante (1991) writes:

To put ourselves once again on the front pages of our own history and culture we need to re-establish the organic nature of our own voice, the unity of our African culture....(134)

Once AAVE Culture is recognized as a part of the African world view and the self, it can be analyzed and appropriately incorporated into the wider repertoire of instructional stimuli.

Giroux' suggestion, that best practices in literacy instruction acknowledge literacy's political context, and our students' need to locate themselves in the contested site of literacy as it is practiced in these United States, complements the African-Centered approach. Giroux (1991) puts it this way:

Our students do not deserve an education constrained by the smothering dictates of a monolithic and totalizing view of culture, literacy, and citizenship; they deserve an education that acknowledges its role in the preparation of critical political subjects and that prepares them to be agents capable of locating themselves in history while simultaneously being able to shape it. (xv)

The African Centered approach to writing instruction makes

the pursuit of literacy more than a positivistic academic exercise. Students' own culture and literacy experiences are recognized as valuable tools which inform ways in which they explore and help shape society. Giroux's theory of politicizing literacy instruction is highly compatible to the situation of the AAVE student. From its beginnings, Black literacy has been political. The enslaved Africans knew that their ways of knowing and being in the world meant nothing in the "New World" and that the only way they could survive was to try to assimilate. They had to learn to manipulate the language and use it to free themselves. When an enslaved African learned to write, she did so knowing that Black lives were at stake. Literacy was not a selfish possession. It was a way of uplifting and freeing the race. Thus, the first Black American texts (enslavement narratives) were political acts. Students need to know that they are heirs to this tradition of struggle. The contemporary fight is for freedom of the mind, freedom to conceive and achieve a new and better world. Agreeing with Giroux, I believe students deserve an education that locates them within their history and encourages them to define their futures.

Fox's (1991) concept of "position" is the third theoretical influence in the proposed African-Centered approach to teaching writing. Position is a geographic

metaphor that locates African American writers in relationship to race and history, race and institutions, and race and gender.

'Position' as a central concept in the exploration of African American student writers requires a pedagogy that would investigate the ways in which history, culture, institutions, social relations ... intersect and influence writing. (292)

This aspect of the African Centered approach coincides with the thinking of progressive language arts educators such as Stock (1995) and Freire & Macedo (1994). These scholars have pointed to the need for integrating the "preoccupations" and "cultural elements" of so-called marginal students into their educational experiences. Educators start from the view point that students are positioned, that they come from somewhere with something. And that this something that students bring with them is valuable and fundamental to the educational process. Students are not blank slates waiting to be written upon. Rather, they are members of gender-ethnic-social groups with histories and all sorts of political and religious affiliations. Their literacy education should invite them to find where they are coming from and where they can go with their talents. The African Centered approach strives to achieve this by connecting AAVE students to the Black literacy tradition and stimulating their critical awareness.

Gates' (1988) theory of "Signifying" illuminates the

importance of acknowledging racial/cultural identity in the African-Centered approach to composition. Gates calls Black Language and the Black literacy tradition the "language of Signifying." For Gates, Signifying is the Black Language tradition! Signifying is the all encompassing term for the ways in which African Americans use language to critique the dominant culture's view of reality. The Black experience as represented in African American literature, especially autobiography, offers a fascinating example of Signifying. Authors repeat and revise themes of the Black experience creating an intertextual chain which refers to that shared experience/cultural identity. In The Signifying Monkey, Gates traces the oral and literate political tradition of the African American experience, highlighting African Americans' preoccupation with the Black tradition of resisting being objectified by talking and reading and writing their way into subjectivity. In other words, African Americans continually redefine their own reality.

In Gates' words:

Signifyin(g) is black double-voicedness; because it entails formal [literal restructuring of forms] revision and an intertextual relation, and ... it is the ideal metaphor for [B]lack literary criticism for the formal manner in which texts seem concerned to address their antecedents. (51)

In this way then, the preoccupations and cultural elements that are concerned with teaching writing to AAVE speaking

students include themes of the Black experience as represented in African American literature, identifying the "freedom as literacy" trope as most crucial. "Freedom through literacy" emerges as one of the earliest traceable themes of the African American experience. This theme is repeated, though with the authors' own sense of difference, in many African American texts such as those written by J. A. Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Nathan McCall, Kate Drumgoold, Maya Angelou, and Sista Souljah.

An African-Centered approach emphasizes the relationship between AAVE cultural identity and its interaction with the reading and writing of texts. Gates sheds light on the fact that "literacy as freedom" and "Signifyin(g)" lie at the heart of the African American experience. "Freedom through literacy" will introduce students to the political-oral-literate tradition of African Americans. In this tradition, reading and writing have always been political. Indeed the goal of the African-Centered curriculum seeks to have students locate themselves within this tradition, to echo the sentiments of Asante above, "fuse the self and the subject."

Baxter and Reed's (1970) bidialectal/contrastive curriculum is the forerunner of the African-Centered approach to culturally relevant literacy instruction. The bidialectal/contrastive approach uses the language and or



variety of non native speakers, [in the this case AAVE], to teach the target language [in this case written LWC]. The bidialectal/contrastive approach does not separate language use and study from culture, values and function. From the bidialectal/contrastive viewpoint, AAVE students need the opportunity to demonstrate competence in their own speech styles while strengthening their facility in the academic style by contrast. Although Baxter and Reed's curriculum was focused mostly at the grammatical level, and my approach is geared more toward the discourse/ rhetorical levels, the same principles apply. The African-Centered approach will provide students the opportunity to write in the AAVE style and the LWC style. This opportunity to bring to the forefront the complexities of writing and thinking in both worlds may help students to capture the power of AAVE in LWC. Through studying selected works, such as Smitherman's seminal work on Black Language and Culture, and Mitchell-Kernan's eloquent discussion and examples of one of AAVE's signature features, indirection and signification, students will explore AAVE as an ideological stance and as a way of being in the world.

## Chapter 5

### **METHODOLOGY**

This quasi-experimental research project explored the implications of centering the language and culture of AAVE speaking students into their writing instruction. The study was aimed at providing insight into this question:

Can an African Centered approach to composition enhance students' production of academic discourse and develop their critical literacy skills?

This project had two dimensions. One was concerned with the development of an African Centered writing curriculum and teaching it to volunteer undergraduate students over one semester. The second was the use of the curriculum as a basis for generating writing research data from AAVE speaking students.

As mentioned, the long range goal of this research was to test pilot the efficacy of an African Centered approach aimed at improving AAVE speaking students' command of academic discourse. While this is critically important, it is equally important for African Americans to master the written word confidently for critical literacy and empowerment.

The methodology for the research combined quantitative and qualitative measures. One quantitative measure allowed for the assessment of the writing from the vantage point of

acceptable academic discourse. That is, it is important that the writing produced by such students pass the test of academic discourse, i.e., demonstrate command of the syntax and discourse of LWC. The writing was assessed on a holistic scale by a panel of professional writing instructors. Three other quantitative measures were used: 1) the distribution and frequency of AAVE syntax; 2) the distribution and frequency of AAVE discourse features and 3) degree of African Self Consciousness.

Qualitative measures provided indices of the students' degree of African Centered Consciousness and attitudes towards the writing process and their writing ability.

#### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The subjects of this study were twenty four students who were members of the AAVE Culture. For purposes of this research any student of African descent living in America for any extended period of time was considered a member of the AAVE Culture. The definition is constructed in this way to accommodate the complexities of identity for American Africans. One of the defining characteristics of the African American identity is the reality of living one's life against a racist text, or a constant reaffirmation of cultural heritage individually and collectively. In the African American literacy tradition, Africans use(d)

language to redefine their own reality for themselves. Hence, students are being asked to see themselves in this tradition as a means of developing their critical literacy as well as academic literacy skills.

Because one of the motivations for this research was to prepare students for academic writing, it was first thought that the ideal "subjects" of the study would be those students who had not had extensive training in academic discourse, preferably freshman, sophomores, and non-English majors who were just beginning the required university writing sequence. Hence, four students who did not fit the original profile would have been excluded from the research population. However, as the researcher-teacher reflected on the "problem" of voice and identity in AAVE students' lives and writing and saw evidence of this "problem" in those four students' writing, those students' work is also included in this study.

#### **INSTRUMENTATION**

Six instruments were used to collect the data: 1) a holistic assessment scale [modeled on Michigan State University's American Thought and Language Department]; 2) a demographic questionnaire; 3) a language/writing attitude questionnaire; 4) The African Self Consciousness Scale; 5) an AAVE Syntax Scale, and 6) a Black Discourse Scale.

The holistic assessment scale consists of eight categories, with "4.0" representing a well developed and well written essay that successfully attempted a thorough response to the prompt, moving to various scores "3.5," "3.0," etc., representing different levels of idea development and command of the written code, ending at "0.0," which represents a poorly written response that did not address the task. The holistic assessment scale can be found in Appendix G. The demographic/informative questionnaire functioned to provide socio-cultural information. The demographic questionnaire can be found in Appendix C. The language/writing attitude questionnaire was used to uncover the subjects' perceptions of themselves as writers and to obtain subjects' language attitudes. The language/writing attitude questionnaire can be found in Appendix D. The African Self Consciousness (ASC) Scale measures degree of racial self awareness on a continuum from Eurocentric to Afrocentric. The ASC Scale can be located in Appendix E. Analysis of AAVE Syntax ascertained the distribution and frequency of AAVE syntax in relationship to LWC syntax. Examples of AAVE syntax found in the data from this study can be located in the AAVE syntax section, pages 74-75. Black Discourse was assessed by measuring the frequency and distribution of such features as they occurred

in students' texts. Essays were given an holistic rating from 5 to 1, where they fell on a continuum from Black to European-styled discourse. Examples of Black discourse features found in the data from this study can be located in the Black discourse section, pages 76-77.

## **PROCEDURES**

The subjects received writing instruction, over a one-semester, fifteen week time frame, using African-Centered materials and instructional stimuli. (Consult Appendix A [course outline] and Appendix B [course syllabus] for full description of this curriculum.) The quasi-experimental instruction was conducted by the researcher. The course was offered as an independent study, English 290, "Race, Writing, and Culture." The student subjects received instruction that involved four components: a) exposure to "freedom through literacy" theme in African American narratives from enslavement narratives to contemporary African American authors, b) instruction and exploration in AAVE and academic writing/rhetorical practices, c) examination of African American Culture through exploration of values, beliefs, and history as presented in African American texts and media, and d) the writing process (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing).

For each student in the research population, three

writing samples were assessed by a panel of experts. The writing samples are the pre and post essays written in class (one at the beginning of the course and one at the end) in an impromptu fashion; the other essay is a sample of the students' polished work (polished). Each essay received two ratings. The ratings were averaged. The raters are experienced composition professionals who regularly teach AAVE students and other linguistic minorities and thus are familiar with the linguistic-cultural contexts and writing strengths and weaknesses of such students. All of the panel of raters are active professionals in the field, particularly those in the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

On the first and last sessions, students were given the same "non-diagnostic" essay question which served as the pre and post essay task: What does it mean to be a member of the AAVE culture (Black) and literate (write)? This question was created for use in this research. As a prompt, students were given the following excerpt taken from Gates' (1988) "Talkin' that Talk" in Race, Writing and Difference:

...When authors of African descent began to publish imaginative literature in English in the eighteenth century, for example, they confronted a collective and racist text of themselves which Europeans had invented. This helps us to understand why so very much Anglo-African writing-

-whether Phillis Wheatley's elegies, or Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, or Ignatius Sancho's epistles--directly addressed European fictions of the African in an attempt to voice or speak the African into existence in Western letters. (403)

Both the question and the passage were employed because they explore an aspect of the AAVE political-literate tradition, writing/speaking the self into subjectivity. This aspect of the Black literacy tradition provided a major underlying assumption of the curriculum. The students wrote 50 minute in-class essays on the question: What does it mean to be Black and literate? It was suggested that students discuss the passage with colleagues for five or ten minutes, engage in any prewriting strategies with which they were comfortable for five or ten minutes (clustering, outlining, freewriting etc.), compose a draft for fifteen or twenty minutes, and use the remaining time to revise and edit what they had produced.

The "polished" essay was built around a passage from Bormann (1971) which discusses two major black rhetorical strategies--the rhetoric of unity or abolition (directed mainly toward white audiences) and the rhetoric of divisiveness (directed mostly at Black audiences). The students were instructed to interpret the passage by Bormann and explain the ideal approach of a persuasive campaign to reform race relations in this country. They were further



instructed to use whatever sources from our course to support their argument. The students had at least four weeks to prepare the paper. Time was provided in class for peer critique or to work on their papers, and students were encouraged to meet with me during office hours to discuss the paper's progress.

On the first and last class meetings, the African Self Consciousness Scale and the language/writing attitude questionnaire were administered. All students willingly responded to the questionnaires. Students were also given exit interviews which asked them to discuss their reactions to the course experience.

#### **STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Although all of the students identified themselves as African (American), one student identified herself as Black/Italian, while two others identified their Black/Native American heritage. Over half of the students came from neighborhoods which were totally African American. Only one student, a journalism major, had taken four writing classes. The remaining students had had, at most, two writing classes. Twenty two students were Sophomores or Freshman, while one student was a Junior, and another, a Senior. Over half of the students spent the years of their nurture in urban surroundings. Students' majors spanned a

wide array of interests, with only one being English proper, the English Education major, who was only just then declaring the major. The class consisted of 7 males and 17 females. The table below displays the demographic background of the students enrolled in the course.

TABLE 1

## STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

<u>Student</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u> <u>Of Hood</u>	<u>Coll</u> <u>Wrtnng</u> <u>Cls</u>	<u>Cls</u> <u>Status</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>H.S.</u> <u>Locale</u>	<u>Major</u>	<u>Sex</u>
African 1	B&W	2	Soph	-25	sub	Bus	F
African 2	AA	2	Soph	-25	urban	P. Law	F
African 3	B&W	2	Soph	-25	urban	P. Med	M
African 4	AA	2	Soph	-25	urban	Bus	M
African 5	AA&L	1	Fresh	-25	urban	P. Med	F
African 6	AA	1	Fresh	-25	urban	No Pref	F
African 7	AA	1	Fresh	-25	rural	Enginr	F
African 8	AA	2	Soph	-25	sub	Biochm	F
*Bi-Afro 9	AA	2	Soph	-25	urban	Educatn	F
African 10	Anglo	2	Fresh	-25	sub	Telcomm	M
African 11	AA	2	Soph	-25	rural	Intl Rltns	F
African 12	AA	1	Fresh	-25	urban	P. Med	F
African 13	AA	2	Soph	-25	urban	Sci & Mth	M
African 14	AA	1	Fresh	-25	sub	P. Med	F
African 15	AA	2	Soph	-25	urban	Eng. Ed.	M
African 16	AA	2	Soph	-25	urban	Med. Tech.	M
African 17	Anglo	1	Fresh	-25	urban	Crim. Jus.	F
African 18	B&W	2	Soph	-25	sub	Poli.Sci.	F
African 19	Anglo	2	Soph	-25	sub	Comp. Sci.	M
African 20	AA, L, PW	1	Soph	-25	urban	Elem. Ed.	F
African 21	AA& NA	2	Sen	-25	urban	Psychlgy	F
African 22	AA	2	Jun	-25	sub	Zoology	F
African 23	AA	4	Soph	-25	urban	Jmlsm	F
**AfroJam24	AA	1	Fresh	-25	sub	Elem. Ed.	F

**Legend**

Ethnicity of Hood= RACIAL MAKE-UP OF NEIGHBORHOOD OF STUDENTS' NURTURE--

B&W= BLACK AND WHITE; AA=AFRICAN AMERICAN; L=LATIN; ANGLO=WHITE; PW=POOR WHITES; NA-NATIVE AMERICAN

\*=Biracial; \*\*Jamaican

### **AAVE SYNTAX IN STUDENTS' TEXTS**

The pieces of writing that were analyzed for AAVE syntax were the pre and post curriculum (impromptu) essays, and a polished piece assigned toward the end of the curriculum. The grammatical categories under consideration were those established in the literature as AAVE syntactic features. The syntactic model for AAVE patterns in my study is a modified version of Smitherman's (1994) NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) essays study.

The syntactic variables were coded following the standard procedure in language variation studies of ascertaining the frequency of potential AAVE patterns to actual patterns. This frequency is expressed as a ratio or a per cent. In the analysis for this study, the percent figure was used. AAVE examples of the variables found in the data from this study are provided below.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Example from Essay</b>
<b>ed morpheme</b>	
Main-verb past (MV + 0)	She learn that the remedial classes were filled with Blacks....
Main-verb-perfect (Have/Had + MV +0)	Being a member of the AAVE Culture and literate makes me feel like I've accomplish something.
Verbal adjective (V +0)	All throughout their educational careers... African American youth are made to feel belittle because they don't speak standard english (proper english).
Passive (be+ MV +0)	Whites are frighten of the educated Black male....

**s morpheme**

Noun plural (N+0 pl)

African who are literate have been subjected to the views of Anglo-Saxon America....

Noun-possessive (N+0 poss)

It was mainly written from a white person point of view.

Third person singular (V+0)

Being Black and literate have many meanings.

**Hypercorrection**

(N pl + s)

Those who choose to write against the common views of the Anglos show these and other peoples exactly how things are determined....

**Copula**

Be + noun (0+N)

...I see that being Black and literate in America \_\_\_ a threat to the white man.

Subject-Verb Agreement--Past  
(Subj pl + was)

It was taken upon the Africans of that day and age to change some of the myths that was pounded into society's head....

**Perfective Done/Have**

(0 have/has/had +MV)

As we \_\_\_seen in the past....

**Irregular Verbs**

Our people begin to take more action after they became literate.  
The whites had took all of the fight out of Blacks.

**Pronominal Apposition**

In Sister Souljah, she talks about this problem.

Analyses focused on overall usage and correlations with other variables--Black discourse, essay scores, and African Self Consciousness.

## **BLACK DISCOURSE AND RHETORIC**

The same essays that were analyzed for syntax were analyzed for Black discourse features. Essays were assessed for use of Black discourse features. Essays were given a holistic score on a scale from 5 to 1, with 5 representing a highly Black discourse styled essay and 1 a European discourse styled essay. The model presented here is a modification of that used in Smitherman's (1994) NAEP essays study.

Features of discourse that occurred in the data from this study are the following:

1. Rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language. Use of metaphors, personifications, vivid imagery. Example: "Our history through the eyes of white America after it has been cut, massacred and censored is pushed down blacks throat."
2. Proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses. Employment of familiar maxims or biblical verses. Example: "...there is a time and place for everything."
3. Sermonic tone reminiscent of traditional Black Church rhetoric, especially in vocabulary, imagery, metaphor. Example: "The man should once again be the leader of the household as God intended and the female... the helpmate."
4. Direct address, conversational tone. These two are not necessarily the same, but often co-occur. Speaking directly to audience--Also, can be a kind of call/response. Example: "Would you rather be respected as Aunt Jemima and Sambo or Queen Nzinga...? As yourself or someone else...?"
5. Cultural references. Reference to cultural items/icons which usually carry symbolic meaning in the AAVE Communities. Example: "There are still those Uncle Toms...out to get you."
6. Ethnolinguistic idioms. Use of language which bears particular meaning in Black community. Example: "...Black english is a 'Black Thang' you wouldn't understand....That's on the real!"
7. Cultural values--community consciousness. Expressions of concern for the development of African Americans; concern for welfare of entire community, not just individuals. Example: "Before Blacks can come together in racial harmony they need to strengthen their own people. Trying to unite...will only cause more

problems if we have not taken care of our own business."

8. **Field dependency.** Involvement with and immersion in events and situations; personalizing phenomenon; lack of distance from topics and subjects. Example: ... [w]e should first try to accomplish better race matters within ourselves. We can do this by patronizing and supporting our Black community."

9. **Narrative sequencing.** Dramatic retelling of a story implicitly linked to topic, to make a point. Reporting of events dramatically acted out and narrated. Relating the facts and personal sociopsychological perspective on them. Example: "I have learned ...some things that never crossed my path in thirteen years of miseducation....This was very important for me because I ...felt that [my] writing was wrong and far beyond improving...."

10. **Tonal semantics (Repetition of sounds or structures to emphasize meaning)**--Example:"European views are the rules...." "We are victimized ...."[structure repeated 4x in subsequent sentences]

11. **Signifying**--use of indirection to make points. May employ oppositional logic, overstatement, understatement--and/or reliance on reader's knowledge of implicit assumption that is taken to be common knowledge (shared world view). Example: "In light of having limited means of getting first hand information we then have had to rely on books and the media to provide us with an unbiased account of information... we know how honest the media is."

12. **Call/response (structural)**--writer returns repetitiously to the prompt as a structural device--checking for constant connection with the question or text at hand. A repeated invocation of the language from the prompt, manifesting as a refrain. Example: "...to be a member of the AAVE Culture and literate...." "Black and literate..." "... Blacks being literate" (repeated 4x).

13. **Testifying**--telling the truth through story--bearing witness to the righteousness of a condition or situation. Example: "I use [the works of Angelou and Douglass] to liberate myself from my hardships to come."

Essays were analyzed for actual occurrences of the above mentioned features and given an overall rating.

## **WRITING ASSESSMENT**

Three writing samples of student writing were gathered over the semester and assessed from the standpoint of acceptable academic discourse: the pre and post(promptu) pieces and one "polished" piece towards the end of the curriculum. Each of the three essays received two ratings

from two separate judges. The scores were averaged. Mean scores were derived for the group. Raw scores and percentages were tabulated for each subject.

#### **AFRICAN SELF CONSCIOUSNESS**

Scholars of Black personality describe a necessary component of the mental health of people of African descent, which generally consists of such individuals' historical, cultural and philosophical awareness and knowledge of themselves as African people. Scholars of Black psychology argue that a healthy Black personality must be defined and affirmed in its own historical, philosophical, and socio-cultural context (Baldwin & Hopkins, 1990). In this view, (mentally healthy) people of African descent operate within the framework of the African world view. The African world view is characterized by basic concepts such as harmony with nature, holistic orientation to experience, spirituality/humanism (including but not limited to organized religion). Orientation to time, view of nature, communalism and others are a few ways in which the African world view and the European world view differ. The experience of living in a society dominated by an opposing European world view creates the need for self conscious reaffirmation of the self for people of African descent. The African Self Consciousness (ASC) scale was created as an attempt to index one's cultural awareness on a continuum from African Centered to European Centered.

According to Baldwin et. al (1987):

The construct (ASC) basically consists of positive black identity, pro-Black beliefs, attitudes, priorities, awareness, knowledge, and practice by African-Americans of the African philosophy and culture. Hence, African self-consciousness is a theoretical construct that attempts to explain the psychological functioning and behavior of persons of African descent from their own cultural perspective. (28)

Baldwin's Black Personality Theory consists of the African self extension orientation and African self consciousness. African self extension is comprised of inferred, unconscious behaviors which are characteristic of Black people, "a spiritual biogenetically defined ...psychological disposition ...that all Black people possess." (29) The ASC component "represents the conscious level process directing the spirituality of the Black personality system" (Baldwin et. al, 1987: 29) and is influenced by social and environmental factors.

The ASC scale as developed by Baldwin and Bell (1985)

...is a 42-item Black personality questionnaire designed to assess African self-consciousness. It comprises four competency and six expressive dimensions. The four competency dimensions are as follows: (1) awareness/recognition of one's African identity and heritage; (2) general ideological and activity priorities placed on Black survival, liberation, and pro-active-affirmative development; (3) specific activity priorities placed on self-knowledge and self-affirmation, i.e., Africentric values, customs, institutions, etc.; (4) a posture of resolute resistance toward anti-Black forces and threats to Black survival in general. The six manifest or expressive dimensions cover the areas of education, family, religion, cultural activities, interpersonal relations, and political



orientation. (qtd. in Baldwin et. al., 1987)

Items are negatively and positively skewed for ASC from 1 through 8, with a 1 representing strongly disagree, and an 8 representing strongly agree. A negatively skewed (and odd numbered) example is "Black studies courses should not be taught at predominantly Black colleges." A positively skewed (and even numbered) example is "Blacks who generally distrust whites are more intelligent than Blacks who do not." Negatively skewed items are scaled in reverse, where a response of 1 would be scored as 8. For example, a person with high ASC would strongly disagree (or choose the number 1 for) the statement "Black studies courses should not be taught at predominantly Black colleges." This response would be scored as an 8. Positively skewed responses are scored directly. For example, a person with high ASC would strongly agree with (or choose number 8 for) the positively skewed (even numbered) example "Blacks who generally distrust whites are more intelligent than Blacks who do not." This response would be scored as is, the number 8. Higher scores represent higher levels of ASC.

A major finding in the work of Baldwin et. al. (1987) with the ASC construct is that "a predominantly Black academic setting correlates positively with ASC." Their work with 250 Black college students, half attending a predominantly Black school and half attending a predominantly white college suggested that:

the social integration movement in America, especially in the area of education, although having some positive effects, may have also had some negative and unhealthy effects on the Black personality. (39)

African Centered literacy instruction then seeks to reverse the unhealthy effects of a society and educational system which has traditionally encouraged mental enslavement to a Eurocentric view of the world, masked as universality.

African Centered literacy instruction encourages self development, critical thinking and literacy skills for self and community. Traditional literacy instruction has trained African Americans for the professions. This approach more often than not prepares them to cooperate in their own oppression.

A major objective of the African Centered approach to Composition is to counteract cultural conflict in literacy instruction, which may hinder achievement. Hence, the basic premise of the African Centered approach to Composition is that students from the AAVE Culture may benefit from culturally relevant literacy instruction, fusion of self and subject. Since this is the case, it is not unreasonable to presume a positive correlation between increased ASC and improvement in literacy. Thus, it was assumed that improvement in literacy (critical and literal) would be related to the amount of improvement (pre to post) in knowledge of self or Black Culture (AAVE Culture) and by extension ASC.

The ASC mean total scores for each student and various levels of demographic and background variables served as data for this aspect of the research.

The Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for all quantitative analyses and significance testing, using ANOVA, chi-square, Pearson correlations and t-test procedures appropriately. Quantitative analyses focused on degree of usage of AAVE syntax, Black discourse, degree of ASC, essay scores and correlations between AAVE syntax, Black discourse, essay scores, and African Self Consciousness.

#### **LANGUAGE/ WRITING QUESTIONNAIRE**

A questionnaire was given at the beginning of the curriculum to ascertain students' background knowledge of AAVE language, academic writing conventions, attitudes toward writing, and kinds of writing most used in and out of school.

A second version of this questionnaire, "Writing Questionnaire" was given at the end of the curriculum, asking students to give their reflections on the instructional materials and attitudes toward writing and AAVE. Both questionnaires served as qualitative analysis of students' interaction with curriculum materials.

## CHAPTER 6

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Analysis of this study's results will focus on the following areas: 1) analysis of essay scores, pre to post and polished essays; 2) comparison of syntax and discourse scores, pre to post; 3) relationship between essay scores and syntax; 4) relationship between essay scores and discourse; 5) gain in ASC, pre to post; 6) change in attitudes toward AAVE and writing, pre to post.

#### WRITING ASSESSMENT

The African Centered curriculum sought to improve subjects' command of academic writing. In order to assess students' gain in essay scores, pre and post essays received two scores from two separate raters. The scores were averaged and a mean for both pre and post for the group was computed. Our focus here will be on the mean pre and post scores to determine overall gain. Essay scores for the group are shown in the table below.

TABLE 2

Scores for pre and post essays  
(n=23)  
.060 > .05

Essay	Mean	Gain
Pre	1.85	
Post	2.26	
		.41
Not statistically significant		

On the pre essay, the class had a mean score of 1.85. For

the post essay, the class mean score was 2.26. Pre to post gain in essay scores was not statistically significant. Although the group gain, from pre to post, did not reach statistical significance, it is helpful to look at the averaged rater score for individual essays, pre to post. Table 3 shows the mean score for each student.

**TABLE 3**

**Averaged scores for each student  
(N=23)**

Subj	Pre Av	Pol Av*	Post Av	Change
1	1.75	3.0	2.75	+1.0
2	1.75	3.0	2.5	+.75
3	2.25	3.0	1.25	-1.0
4	2.0	2.0	2.5	+.50
5	2.75	N/A	2.0	- .75
6	2.5	3.0	2.5	0.0
7	2.25	2.25	1.75	-.50
8	2.0	2.75	1.75	-.25
9	1.25	3.50	3.25	+2.0
10	2.0	1.75	2.25	+.25
11	2.5	3.5	3.0	+.50
12	2.0	2.0	3.0	+1.0
13**	1.0	N/A	N/A	N/A
14	3.5	3.0	2.25	-1.25
15	1.25	2.25	2.0	+.75
16	1.0	3.0	1.25	+.25
17	2.0	2.0	1.5	-.50
18	1.25	3.5	2.25	-1.0
19	.50	2.75	2.5	+2.0
20	1.5	3.75	2.25	+.75
21	4.0	2.5	2.25	-1.75
22	.50	3.5	2.25	+1.75
23	1.75	3.5	2.5	+.75
24	.25	2.5	2.5	+2.25

\*Polished essay not factored into difference (change)

\*\* Not factored into analysis because post essay is missing

When we look at the averaged scores for each individual student, we can see that over half of the students improved, or 60% of the students gained anywhere from .25 to 2.25

increase in score from pre to post. For example, Subject #19 had a score of .50 on the pre essay and earned a score of 2.5 on the post essay, making a gain of 2.0. Additionally, subject #24 earned a score of .25 on the pre essay. On the post essay this student's score was 2.5, a gain of 2.25.

Because the sample or number of the participants in this study was so small, it was decided that a chi-square analysis might offer a closer look at the scoring patterns for the essays in this study. Students' scores were divided into 3 groups (high 2.5-4.0, medium 1.51-2.49, low 0-1.5) and assessed for significant change from pre to post. The scoring categories are divided in this way for balance. Table 4 below displays the results.

**TABLE 4**

Low, medium and high scoring patterns  
for pre and post essays  
(N=23)  
.138 > .05

Essay	Low	Med	High
Pre	33%	46%	21%
Post	13%	43%	44%

Not statistically significant

On the pre essay 33% of the class scored in the low category, 46% in the medium category, and 21% in the high category. On the post essay, 13% of the subjects scored in the low category, 43% scored in the medium category, and 44% of the subjects placed into the high essay scoring category.

Although this analysis did not reach statistical significance, change is evident in the scoring patterns from pre to post. The low category decreased by approximately 20%, while the high category more than doubled. Equally important is the shift of scores out of the low category, to the medium or high categories on the post essay. A look at the class status of the students who scored lowest on the pre essay proves interesting. Out of the eight lowest scoring students there were six sophomores, one junior, and one freshman. Six of these students had had two writing classes prior to the African Centered writing course, while two had had only one. Even though the majority of the students had taken two writing classes these students still scored low on the pre essay. This finding confirms my prediction that a course such as this is beneficial at higher levels of the curriculum, and not just at the "basic writing" level.

Although the scores of the polished piece are not factored into the gain pre to post gain, the averaged scores of the polished essays reveal that students were learning to construct college-level, academically-styled, texts. The mean score of the polished piece was 2.82.

It is illuminating to look at the pre, post and polished essays of one student from the low scoring group, for these essays taken as a whole demonstrate significant development in writing skills. This student, African #16,

had taken two writing courses previously. For both the pre and post essays, the student is writing on the question, "What does it mean to be a member of the AAVE Culture (Black) and literate?" The pre essay reads:

Africans writers are very unique. They tell stories that the average white man proably couldn't even imagine. Blacks write from experience that can not be disputed by others because they have gone through the events for themselves. While discussing the question it made me really think that whites had blacks right where they wanted them. Blacks were uneducated and illerate. So when whites wrote about us we couldn't say that it wasn't right because we couldn't read what was written. So when we started to write for ourselves we gave the world a whole new point of view. We should society the world that were not stupid and savages but a people of pride. White authours made us out to be uncivilized with no purpose until they came. They were supposed to be our savior, and show us the right way. But in Reality they were the devils. Now that we have changed the perspective of ourselves White are truly scared of the power we hold in shaping the world. This was the whole reason of self intemadation and low self esteem.

The above essay is 190 words in length. The prose does not adhere to conventional essay form: it has no title, no paragraphing, insufficient transitional statements to guide the reader through the ideas the writer is trying to convey, weak conclusion. The opening statement is vague. The writer's field dependent style does not lend the argument the broader perspective expected for the "imagined/hostile" reader. The topic at hand--the Black American literacy tradition--is highly charged in that most facets of the Black experience are controversial. In this regard, a



reader is more likely to be persuaded to the author's point of view if the writing appears informed, if it points to authoritative sources as it makes its claims. This essay received an average score of 1.0 from the raters.

The post essay of African #16 evinces growth:

#### Improvement in Literacy

There have been numerous changes in the way authors write material. For many years the writings of Black authors were written to appeal strickly to the European audience. With changes in society our modern Black authors such as Nathan McCall, Sista Souljah, and Malcolm X are writting to appeal to both the Black audience and the European audience. Author's during the 18th Century were intended for the larger white community.

One of the reasons writings didn't appeal to the Black community is because of the lack of ability to read. Frederick Douglass even talked about how he learn how to read. Douglass had to sneak to achieve his literacy. This wasn't a privillage that Blacks were offered on a everyday basis. When Blacks learned to read there was a need to write to interest and inform. Without any readers of literature during this period there left no need to write.

Why was gaining literacy such a hard task for Black during this time. Firstly the Europeans wanted total authority over Blacks. This left no need to educate. If Blacks were left ignorant there was less resistance. All of these measures had an affect on how the first Black authors wrote and are perceived today. There are many that feel this.

Although this essay is only ten words longer than the pre essay (200 words), the writing is improved. The writing adheres to conventional essay form. It has a title which alerts readers to its unique take on the subject of the Black literacy tradition, "Improvement in Literacy." The

opening statement orients readers to the subject--"changes in the way authors write material." The writing evinces a sense of informed authority. It refers us to modern Black authors who write for both a Black and a European audience, as opposed to the Black authors of the "18th Century [whose works] were intended for the larger white community."

Though the sentence referring to 18th Century Black authors could be clearer, the reader understands what the writer is trying to show. The paragraphs following the introduction show why Black authors had to appeal to the white audience. We see the writer striving for objective prose in the use of a topic sentence in the first paragraph of the body and the use of the transitional word, "Firstly" even though it appears in the conclusion. There are summary statements in the final paragraph: "All of these measures had an affect on how the first Black authors wrote and are perceived today, [and] There are many that feel this." Certainly the reader would like more elaboration on the points. Nonetheless, we can see that from pre to post the writer is beginning to build an academic posture. The writing is no longer field dependent, but looking out to authoritative sources. Although African #16's post essay score only increased by .25, the writing does exhibit growth. The low rating may be due to the abbreviated nature of the response.

For the polished piece, African #16's argument is concerned with the most expedient rhetorical strategy for

the healing of American race relations, divisiveness or unity, as discussed in a passage on traditional Black rhetorical strategies by Bormann (1971). Bormann posits that there are two main categories of Black rhetoric, the rhetoric of divisiveness and the rhetoric of unity. The former appeals strickly to a Black audience and the latter to the Black and non-Black audiences. Bormann holds up Martin Luther King's rhetoric as an example of the rhetoric of unity and implies the rhetoric of Black Nationalism as an example of divisive rhetoric. African# 16's essay reads:

#### Unity In the Black Community

The paragraph written on Black rhetoric by Ernest Bormann discussed two very interesting approaches that contemplate unity within the Black community. One approach of rhetoric appeals to the Black audience. The other approach by which Bormann explained America could reach racial harmony is by coming together as one whole society, or the rhetoric of unity. My argument is that before any racial togetherness can be addressed on a wide scale there are problems that must be addressed in our own Black communities. Adopting a strategy of divisiveness which allows division of the two groups may be the most effective means of progression. Therefore the Black community must unite as one before taking the challenge to reach racial harmony with the larger society.

A major problem in the Black community is the way we respond to and accept one another. Many times Blacks talk down to other Black youth so hard that eventually the words become reality. Maybe if the negative stereotypes are avoided society might not get the same perception. For example, Nathan McCall's book Makes me wanna holler has many examples of this negativity among Blacks. Nathan's mother is a good example. She has internalized the mentality that Blacks have been fed throughout the years and passed it on to her children. While Nathan, his brothers, and his

mother were at a restaurant and they started acting mischievous Nathan's mother said "stop showing your color. Stop acting like a nigger" (Makes me wanna holler 12). Giving reference to Black as being bad and that Blacks are always acting like niggers eventually becomes a part of the person's life. The first step to uplifting the Black race may be to discard negative stereotypes.

Another issue that needs to be confronted in the Black community is the way Black men and Black women interact. Black women have been hurt over and over by Black men but the animosity towards each other needs to cease. The bond between the two should be the strongest because of the circumstances they have overcome. In her book No Disrespect Souljah explains the reason why Black women and men don't have the love and respect for one another. One of the reasons is because they lack love and respect for themselves. How could they love someone else without loving themselves? Sista Souljah says that young Black women "should not look to men [they] meet, or to [their] girlfriend for ... self-esteem. Act smart: Don't end up crying and hurt" (No Disrespect, 354). Souljah thinks that many of these problems stem from slavery and on the plantation when Black men were looked upon simply as a tool to produce children and Black women as simply sex objects. These perceptions are still seen today. Souljah goes on to say that "Hollywood encourages men only to focus on women as physical objects. Or even particular portions of a woman's anatomy--legs, breast, ass, and so on" (No Disrespect, 355). This is the image that the media wants to portray of the Black community. These problems show the lack of respect we have for each other. Circumstances that were not preventable such as slavery and destruction of the family are the reason many problems exist today. Black men and women are the backbone of the community and need to teach love and respect to each other.

Despite some of the negative views of the Black Muslims they still promote Black empowerment and pride through education, religion, and Black owned businesses. The Muslims are an example of how the Black community can be influenced in a positive way. With the development of publications, schools, and stores they show society that Blacks are capable of reaching independence. An example of the Muslims' ability

to help Blacks be self empowered is offered in Makes me wanna holler. The Black Muslims were committed to self help and of Black pride. There was also encouragement in the book to show how Muslim influence changed prison mates. Nathan recalls incidents from the Muslims and says "unlike traditional Black groups that keep plodding ahead, running into brick walls trying to gain acceptance to the system, the Muslims were willing to do something that Black folks in general have a hard time doing--change direction" (Makes me wanna holler, 245). These Muslims were there to lend out a helping hand regardless of there past background. This organization is an ideal model for how the Black community should be and interact. The rhetoric of divisiveness may be the first step towards racial harmony.

On the other hand, reaching racial harmony through the rhetoric of unity may be more appealing to the wide masses of America but does not fit the needs of Blacks today. Blacks need some sense of control over their lives. It sounds good for Blacks and whites to love one another, and integration but the pain is greater than the mere words. The psychological problems lie deeper than just racial harmony, but in social independence and love themselves and their Black community. Needless to say many think that division is adding to the problem of racism, but is vital in the development of a strong nation....

The above essay is over 850 words in length. It received an averaged score of 3.0 from the raters. The essay has a title which alerts readers to its main idea, topic sentences, and it evinces interesting development of a main idea with supported claims. It is clear that this student is beginning to master academic conventions.

A major aspect of academic discourse is that it is expected to be expository. In other words, it should elaborate effectively. The African Centered approach to composition seeks to provide students with a culturally

relevant literacy experience that would hopefully engage them in ways that would help them to produce more quality texts. For this reason, an analysis was conducted to detect interaction between essay scores and total words written. Table 5 shows correlations between mean number of words and essay scores.

**TABLE 5**

Correlations between essay scores  
and total words in each essay  
(N=23)

Essay	Mean Essay Score	Mean Essay Length	R-Value	P-Value
Pre	1.85	179.87	.307	.144
Polished	2.81	798.68	.634	.002*
Post	2.26	311.04	.717	.000*

\*= Statistically significant at .01 level.

To determine essay length, all essays were re-typed in WordPerfect 6.1 which calculated the number of words for individual essays and the group. For the pre essay, the mean score was 1.85, with a mean essay length of about 179 words. As for the post essay, the mean score was 2.26, with a mean essay length of approximately 311 words. For the polished essay, the mean score was 2.81. The length of the polished essay was about 798 words.

In the relationship between total words and essay score, the results are significant for the polished and post essay. For the pre essay, there is no significant relationship between total words written and the essay

score. This may mean that there may not have been enough written for a relationship to exist between quantity and quality of writing. Although we know that quantity of words in an essay and essay quality are not causally related, they usually co-occur. For the post essay, the mean essay score of 2.26 corresponded highly with the mean essay length of 311.04 words. For the polished essay, the mean essay length for the class of 798.68 words correlates significantly with the mean essay score of 2.81. In other words, as the essay length increased, the essay score increased. Comparing the pre and post essays in terms of score and essay length, I attribute the positive correlation between quantity and quality of essays with better overall writing quality in the post essays, at least from the standpoint of academic writing. Further, students had better knowledge of the black literacy tradition by the end of the curriculum. The table below shows that there was significance in the students' ability to produce more words as the curriculum progressed.

TABLE 6

Total words for each essay  
(N=23)

Essay	Mean # Wrds	Change in # of Wrds
Pre	179.87	
Post	311.04	131.16*

\*=Total words pre to post significant .018 < at the .05 level

The results in Table 6 suggest that the mean word difference of 131.16 from pre to post is significant. In other words, the gain in words from the pre to the post essay question may be attributable to the treatment or the students' interaction with the African Centered curriculum. It is expected that students would be more conversant in the topic by the end of the course. On the polished essay, the mean length was 798 words. The longer length is expected for a polished piece of writing since it is assumed that it has undergone significant critique and revision.

#### **AAVE SYNTAX**

One aspect of the African Centered approach to writing instruction was that students would demonstrate more control over their use of AAVE syntax if it was taught in contrast to LWC. An analysis was conducted to measure degree of change in students' AAVE syntax usage. The syntactic variables were coded following the standard procedure in language variation studies of ascertaining the frequency of potential AAVE patterns to actual patterns. This frequency is expressed as a per cent. Use of AAVE syntax for the group is shown in Table 7.

**TABLE 7**

#### **AAVE syntax in pre and post essays**

(N=23)			
Essay	Mean	Change	P-Value
Pre	16.58		
Post	13.44	-3.13	.590
Not statistically significant pre to post			



The AAVE variants "Perfective done/have" and "pronominal apposition" were excluded from the analysis because the frequency in those categories was less than two occurrences, hence such occurrences were not large enough to be included. On the pre essay, a mean of 16.58% of AAVE syntax was used. A mean of 13.44% AAVE syntax was used on the post essay. Measurement of AAVE syntax reveals low usage in all three essays. Although this test did not reach statistical significance, there was a decrease in AAVE syntax usage from pre to post for the group as a whole. The decrease noted in this study is right in line with Smitherman's (1992) NAEP study wherein she found that AAVE usage was converging with LWC. Another point of note that must be constantly borne in mind with data in this study is that the polished essay was generated under different conditions, thus these AAVE data will not be compared to pre and post essay data. The Table below offers a description which allows examination of the actual number of subjects using a given variant, the mean percentage with which the variant was used by subjects and by the group for each essay.

**TABLE 8**

**Breakdown of AAVE Usage**

<b>Essay</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
<b>Pre</b>	<b>Irreg. Verb</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0</b>		
<b>Post</b>		<b>1.00</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>1.00</b>

(Table 8 -cont.)

Pre	<b>Ed morpheme</b>	.50	2	.50	.50
Post		.42	3	.17	.80
Pre	<b>S morpheme</b>	.54	4	.14	.75
Post		.30	5	.14	.40
Pre	<b>Copula</b>	.28	4	.13	.50
Post		.30	4	.17	.50

**Legend:**

\*\*\*\*=Most frequently used AAVE syntax category

N= Number of subjects using the AAVE variable

Minimum=Least amount of usage for any one student

Maximum=Most amount of usage for any one student

The AAVE variant that occurred with the highest frequency in any essay was "Irregular verb." An example of this variant is "Whites had took all the fight out of Blacks." The highest amount of usage was 100% on the post essay. It is important to note, however, that only one person contributed to this category.

The next most frequently occurring variable was "S morpheme" at 54% in the pre essay where "s" is not realized for plurals, possessives or third person singular verbs; or, it is used hypercorrectly. Within the "s morpheme" category, the predominant AAVE variant was third person singular (V+0), as in "Being Black and literate have many meanings." Four people contributed to this category. The least amount of usage for "s morpheme" as signified by "Minimum" was 14% usage by one student, while the most

amount of usage was 75% by one student as signified by "Maximum." Again, the key point is that AAVE usage pre to post did decrease. From pre to post "s morpheme" use went from 54% to 30%. Contrasting AAVE syntax with LWC syntax may have helped to control AAVE usage.

The third most frequently occurring AAVE variable in the writing for the students in this study was "ed morpheme" at 50% in the pre essay, where the "ed" is not realized for past tense, the verbal adjective, in the passive form--copula + zero ed; nor is it used with "have/had + main verb-perfect." Two subjects contributed to this category. Within this category the passive form occurred most frequently, as in "Whites are frighten...." In the post essay, "ed morpheme" decreased to 42% usage, with three subjects using the variant. Of those three subjects using the variant, the minimum amount of usage--the least any one person used the variant was .17% and the most or the maximum usage was .80%.

The AAVE category "copula" was the least frequently occurring variable with a mean usage of .28% in the pre essay, with four students using this variant. For the post essay, "copula" was used a mean of .30% with only four students contributing to the category. The variable within this category with the most usage was "Subject-Verb Agreement-Past (Subj pl +was)." An example is: "...[T]he stories the authors wrote was written more for the Black

audience than the white audience." It is to be expected that copula use would be lowest because it is "Zero copula" that most marks AAVE from LWC. So forms associated with the copula may also be among the most stigmatized of AAVE variables. Hence, by the time most AAVE students have matriculated into college they are more conscious of such features in their writing.

"Irregular verb" was the most frequently occurring AAVE variant for the polished essay, with a minimum usage of .13% and a maximum usage of 1.00% and overall mean of .43%. Only three students contributed to this category. The next most frequently occurring variant in the polished essay, "ed morpheme", was used by five students who contributed to the class mean of .27%. The class mean for AAVE "s morpheme" was .24% with ten students using the feature. The minimum amount of usage for the variant was .05%, and the maximum amount of usage was 1.00%. As in the pre and post essays, AAVE "copula" was the least used variant in the polished essay. It occurred at a mean of .17%. It was used by only four students. Its minimum amount of use was .07%. Its maximum amount of use was .25%.

Although statistical tests of AAVE syntax usage did not reach significance, from pre to post, it is helpful to look at individual cases, which demonstrate significant development in control over AAVE use. African #18 used the AAVE variants, "Zero ed for past tense" and "Subject plural

+ was," 50% of the time, in the pre essay. In the post essay, no AAVE variants in any categories surfaced for this student. Additionally, African #3 used the AAVE variant "Zero ed for past tense" 50% of the time in the pre essay. This individual also used no AAVE variants in the post essay. As a composition teacher trying to facilitate command of written LWC, this improvement in command of LWC syntax is significant for these individuals.

Another interesting finding is that 10 students used some AAVE variable(s) in the pre essay, while 13 students used AAVE on the post essay. Ironically, the increased number of words written from pre (180) to post (311) created the probability for the environment in which more AAVE forms could occur. This makes the decrease in overall AAVE important because it shows that students had more control and confidence on the post essay.

Concurring with the work of other scholars, Smitherman (1994) found that Black discourse and AAVE syntax are not necessarily co-occurring variables. For this reason a Pearson correlations analysis was conducted to determine any relationship between AAVE syntax use and Black discourse in the present study. The results of that analysis is shown in the table below.

**TABLE 9****Relationship between AAVE syntax and Black discourse****(N=23)**

<b>Essay</b>	<b>AAVE syntax Mean</b>	<b>Black discourse Mean</b>	<b>P- Value</b>
<b>Pre</b>	16.58	2.65	.213
<b>Post</b>	13.44	2.65	.311

**Not statistically significant.**

On the pre essay, overall, students used AAVE syntax 16.58% and employed a mean of 2.65 Black discourse features. On the post essay, students' use of AAVE syntax decreased to 13.44%, while their employment of Black discourse remained the same at a mean of 2.65 features. For the polished essay, the AAVE syntax mean was 7.91, and the mean for Black discourse usage was 3.66. Though not statistically significant, it appears that Black discourse and AAVE syntax are not co-occurring variables. As one of the underlying assumptions of the African Centered approach to composition is that students can be Black and write and right, this observed trend is important for teachers who want to promote liberatory writing because it attests to the fact that students can write Black without using AAVE syntax, which could be detrimental to the writing's assessment.

Since LWC syntax is the convention in academic discourse, it is expected that the use of AAVE syntax would correlate negatively with essay scores. Hence, an analysis

was conducted to determine any possible relationship between AAVE syntax and essay scores. Table 10 below shows the results.

**TABLE 10**

**Relationship between AAVE syntax and essay scores  
(N=23)**

Essay	Mean Essay Score	Mean Syntax Score	R-Value	P-Value
Pre	1.85	16.58	-1.92	.648
Polished	2.81	7.91	-4.72	.076
Post	2.26	13.44	.067	.853

Not statistically significant.

The mean pre essay score is 1.85, while the percentage of AAVE use is 16.58%. The mean post essay score is 2.26, with a mean AAVE syntax percentage of 13.44%. For the polished essay, the mean essay score was 2.81, with a mean AAVE syntax usage of 7.91%. This analysis did not reach statistical significance. For one thing there was overall low AAVE usage for the students in this study. Further, Smitherman's (1992) NAEP essays study found that teachers did not penalize students, as had been the case in the past, for their employment of AAVE syntax. Therefore, my non-significant effect for negative essay ratings and high AAVE syntax is right in line with Smitherman's finding.

#### **BLACK DISCOURSE**

One of the tenets of the African Centered writing curriculum was that form and content are inseparable, and

that language use reflects ideology. African Americans' discourse should be crafted appropriately to meet the needs of the audience. However, African Americans do not write what they think the reader wants to read. They write from a well informed perspective, and they may employ Black discursive and rhetorical strategies. It was expected that Black discourse usage would increase over the semester, as students were encouraged to write Black. The table below shows Black discourse usage for the group.

**TABLE 11**

**Black Discourse Usage  
(N=23)**

<b>Essay</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>P-Value</b>
<b>Pre</b>	2.65		
<b>Post</b>	2.65	.000	.913

Not statistically significant

On both the pre and post essays, students employed a mean of 2.65 Black discourse features. In other words, students used just as much Black discourse in the beginning of the course as they did in the end. There is no significant change in the use of Black discourse from pre to post. For the polished essay, use of Black discourse increased. The mean for the group usage was 3.66 features per essay. This increase of Black discourse can be attributed to increased essay length which offered more opportunities for the employment of Black discourse.



The most frequently used Black discourse features were "Cultural Values--Community Consciousness" and "field dependency." The nature of the prompts, their basis in the Black experience, may have influenced the students' heightened involvement with the topic, especially since person centeredness is a central aspect of AAVE Culture. Hence, expressions of concern for all African Americans (Cultural Values--Community Consciousness) and field dependency (lack of distance from topic) were the most prominent discourse features. These features occurred 39 and 27 times respectively, over all three essays. The least occurring of the Black discourse features is cultural reference. It occurred 2 times, once in the polished batch, and again in the post batch of essays. Recall that a part of the work of the curriculum was to allow students to experiment with and employ Black discourse features in various rhetorical contexts. Perhaps students need more time to experiment with incorporating AAVE culture and thought and its representation (discourse features) into their academic work. By doing this, they will be able to develop a sensibility about which features work well for specific kinds of writing tasks, as well as which features work well together.

One of Smitherman's (1994) findings was that African American students who used more Black discourse scored higher than those students who did not. Following

Smitherman's lead, an analysis was conducted to determine whether essays received higher essay scores with greater use of Black discourse features, using the essay categories high (2.5-4.0), medium (1.51-2.49) and, low (0-1.5). The results, shown in the table below, are highly significant.

**TABLE 12**

(N=23)

Relationship between Black discourse and essay scores

	Range of Essay scores	Discourse Mean	P-Value
Pre	Low	2.28	.0241*
	Med	2.11	
	High	4.50	
Polished	Med	3.66	1.00
	High	3.66	
Post	Low	1.00	.4917
	Med	2.50	
	High	3.00	

\*=Statistically significant at .05 level.

On the pre essay, students in the low scoring group used a mean of 2.28 Black discourse features, while students in the medium scoring group used 2.11 Black discourse features. The students who scored the highest on the pre essay used the most Black discourse features, 4.5, in their essays. For the post essay, the lowest scorers used only 1.0 Black discourse feature. The students in the medium scoring range used a mean of 2.5 Black discourse features,

while the students in the high scoring category used 3.0 features. Although overall Black discourse for the group was the same in the pre and post, the post students who scored highest only used 3.0 Black discourse features, not as many as the pre essay highest scorers who used 4.5 features. For the polished essay, there was no low scoring group. Both the medium and high scorers used 3.66 Black discourse features in their essays. The data in the above table point out that the students who scored highest on the pre essay were those who used the most Black discourse. This finding confirms that of Smitherman (1994) in her research on the NAEP essays. Yet essays from the present study add another dimension to Smitherman's results. Three of the four essays in the high scoring group employed field dependency among their many Black discourse features. Generally, essays that display field dependency are in opposition to the "objectivity" that characterizes academic discourse. I would argue that field dependency is the hallmark of the Black style, a signature feature. It is as salient a Black discourse feature as "Zero copula" is for AAVE syntax. Field dependency epitomizes the person centered assumptions of AAVE Culture. One possible explanation for the essay results is that the students' overall unfamiliarity with the essay topic and low confidence yielded a lower quality batch of essays. To this effect, papers that would have normally been rated as

marginal got rated higher. Another possibility is that the pre essay got rated higher since it was the first essay graded.

A more interesting and highly probable explanation is that in the essays which employed field dependency, students' use of other features such as ethnolinguistic idioms, use of proverbs\aphorisms\biblical verses, cultural values\ community consciousness, rhythmic-dramatic-evocative language etc. outweighed the use of field dependency. This may have allowed for field dependent essays to be rated higher. Perhaps the distinct Black confident voice of the field dependent essays rendered them lively and interesting. An example of one of the high scoring and highly Black discourse-styled pre essays follows. It was written by African #21. She writes:

1           To be a member of the AAVE culture and  
2   literate to me means to be able to communicate not  
3   only with my people but the people around me in my  
4   day to day interactions. It means to be able to  
5   dispel the myths of Black literacy or rather  
6   illiteracy that continues to plague our society  
7   (white society), into believing that we are not  
8   competent in the english language, when we  
9   understand one another just fine. It means to be  
10   able to communicate with my brother or sister and  
11   still be able to compete in the "real" world with  
12   those who frown upon Black english and view it as  
13   an educational handicap, when in fact, it opens  
14   the doors to my people, my culture, and in  
15   defining who I am. Europeans tend to think that  
16   their view of how we speak or what defines  
17   literacy has to be proper standard english. But  
18   who says "white" english is proper or ever  
19   standard. The english language is made up of  
20   words and terms stolen from every language and  
21   people under the sun, but Black english is all our

22 own. Made for our people, by our people, to  
 23 communicate with one another, and has been around  
 24 just as long as any other language. So to me, to  
 25 be a member of the Black Culture and literate  
 26 means to be proud, not ashamed of the way I  
 27 communicate, because the people that are important  
 28 in my life understand everything I say. I can  
 29 still function academically, and in the workplace,  
 30 and because I am literate in both Black and  
 31 standard english I dispel the stereotypes that  
 32 whites and some Blacks so easily accept. So when  
 33 you say Black english is a "Black thang" you  
 34 wouldn't understand, truly it is, and if you don't  
 35 understand, then who has the real handicap, and  
 36 that's on the real!

**Field dependency** can be detected in structures containing personal pronoun referents, [me, we, my, our], such as in line 2 "To be a member of AAVE..to me means to be able to communicate not only with (line 3) my people but the people around me in my..."; (lines 7-9) "...[W]e are not competent... when we understand...."; Observe the use of "my" in line 14-- "...my people, my culture. In lines 21-22 are examples of the **field dependent** use of "our"--"...Black english is all our own. Made for our people, by our people. Further, **field dependency** can be seen in the use of "I" in lines 15, 26, 28, 29, and 30. "I" is used in such a way that "I" is not separate from other members of the AAVE culture or Blacks in the author's discussion of what it means to be Black and literate. Hence, field dependency is an overall impression of the essay and can be realized in the kind of features identified above.

Another Black discourse feature displayed in the student's essay is cultural values\community consciousness

of African Americans in the statement: "It means to be able to communicate with my brother or sister...it opens the doors to my people, my culture...." In this statement "my brother or sister" reflects concern for/ or consciousness of Black males and females, as an extension of the self.

Notice the allusion to U. S. Constitutional language in lines 21-22: "Made for our people, by our people..." Also note in line 20 the phrase "...under the sun" which echoes the saying "nothing new under the sun." These statements demonstrate uses of **aphorisms**, another Black discourse feature. The rhetorical approach apparent in the essay as a whole is a personal **testimony** to the power of being a member of the AAVE Culture. **Testifying** is also apparent from lines 24 and beyond in the statement: "...So to me, to be a member of the AAVE culture and literate means to be proud, not ashamed of the way I communicate...." In those statements the writer is bearing witness. **Direct address** is reflected in the questions (although not punctuated as such): [lines 17-18] "But who says 'white' english is proper or ever standard" and "...who has the real handicap" [line 34].

Recall that direct address can be discerned by among other things a conversational tone that sounds like spoken speech written down, a direct conversation with the reader. The **ethnolinguistic idioms** glare in the final statements:

"...Black english is a 'Black thang' you wouldn't understand" and "...and that's on the real!" I think we can

say that the student's essay demonstrates a creative and intellectual (Black and literate) expression of her understanding of the concepts reflected in the prompt, "What does it mean to be a member of the AAVE Culture and literate?"

#### **AFRICAN SELF CONSCIOUSNESS**

One of the hypotheses of the African Centered approach to composition was that the language and culture of African Americans must be factored into their literacy experiences to counteract African American students' well documented lag in literacy achievement. Scholars of Black Psychology have developed an African Centered theory of the Black personality (Karenga, 1993). These scholars agree that the healthy Black personality is rooted in the African world view. The African world view fundamentally opposes the European world view in its orientation to time/experience/nature, family-life, spirituality and more. The experience of living in a society dominated by a European worldview relegates the experience of people of African descent to a subordinate position. Thus, people of African descent must consciously reaffirm themselves from their own historical, socio-cultural, political, educational and spiritual perspective. Hence, Baldwin's (1992) African Self Consciousness (ASC) construct theorizes that the healthy Black personality "has a bio-genetic tendency to affirm rather than deny Black life, makes group a priority,

including survival of culture and institutions, and engages in activities that promote this survival..." (Karenga, 1993:454). The ASC scale is useful as it attempts to monitor knowledge of oneself as a person of African descent.

As described earlier, the ASC scale is a 42 statement questionnaire. The statements are responded to in the following manner: strongly disagree (1-2), disagree (3-4), agree (5-6), and strongly agree (7-8). Items are positively and negatively skewed for ASC. Odd numbered items are skewed negatively, such that the ideal African Centered response of 1=8, 2=7, 3=4 etc; An example of a negatively skewed item is "I have difficulty identifying with the culture of African people." The ideal response would be 1 and it would be scored as an 8. Even numbered items are skewed positively for ASC. An example of a positively skewed item is "It is intelligent for Blacks in America to organize to educate and liberate themselves from white-American domination." The ideal African Centered response would be an 8 which would be scored as 8. A response of 7 would be scored as 7, 6=6 etc. High scores reflect high levels of ASC.

The mean total score of the students' degree of ASC is reported in the table below.



**TABLE 13**

**African Self Consciousness  
(N=23)**

Pre	Post	Change
5.59	5.80	+.21

Not statistically significant

On the pre administration of the ASC Scale, the mean score was 5.59. For the post administration, the mean score was 5.80, a gain of .21%. The table shows that students made overall gain in ASC from pre to post curriculum. Because Baldwin & Hopkins (1985) deemed a mean score of 5.0 as the division point between high and low ASC groups in their seminal work, we can see that the students in my study came in with higher levels of ASC than the students in their study. For this reason, a second analysis was conducted which divided the means into low and high groups with 5.49 and below--low, and 5.50 and above representing high. When examined in this way, five scores moved up into the high category on the post administration. Although this test did not reach statistical significance, this observation is supported by Baldwin et. al.'s (1987) findings which suggest that a Black academic environment positively reinforces ASC.

What follows is a selection of four statements from the ASC scale. These items were selected from the post administration to give insight into statements which were problematic for students.

#2. Black people should have their own independent schools which consider their African heritage and values an important part of the curriculum.

15 students agreed with this statement.

8 students disagreed with this statement.

#21. There is no such thing as African culture among Blacks in America.

4 students disagreed and 19 agreed with this statement.

#36. African culture is better for humanity than European culture.

14 students agreed, while 8 disagreed with this statement.

#39. If a good/worthwhile education could be obtained at all schools (both Black and white), I would prefer for my child to attend a racially integrated school.

14 students disagreed with this statement.

8 students agreed with this statement.

The overwhelming majority of students are aware that African culture exists among African Americans. And, as reflected in their responses to numbers 2 and 39, the majority of the students feel that their children would be better served by an educational system that spoke to the needs of African American students. However, eight students still believe that humanity would be better served by European culture, after a whole semester of studying African Centered literature and concepts. This struggle to develop a healthy sense of themselves is caused by the three realms of experience (Black cultural, minority, and mainstream) that African American students live in, described by Boykin (1986) as the triple quandary. Boykin essentially posits that like the experience of living in the larger society,

educational environments affect Black students in a way that renders them not doubly, but triply conscious. They cannot receive a coherent understanding of themselves or their people from the schooling experience. In his 1996 Black history month lecture here at MSU, Professor Asante discussed the problem of the traditional Eurocentric approach to education. He essentially argued that it is more often than not the case that the more education a person of African descent receives, the more he/she is distanced from his/her culture. In other words, people of African descent are made to reject themselves as the price for education. It is unreasonable to think that one semester of African Centered studies would reverse the experience of living a fragmented life against a racist text.

The goal of the curriculum was to encourage exploration of AAVE Culture in connection with its political-literary tradition. For Blacks literacy is political. Thus, the assumption is that African American students will be motivated to develop their literacy skills if literacy is studied from their own cultural perspective. Following this line of thought, then, high ASC is expected to correlate positively with high essay ratings. For this reason, another analysis was conducted to uncover any interaction between high and low ASC scores and essay scores. Again,

ASC was divided into high (5.5 and above) and low (5.49 and below). Students' essays were divided into high, (2.5-4.0), medium, (1.51-2.49), and low, 0-1.5. The table below displays the results of this analysis.

**Table 14**

**Relationship between high and low ASC and essay scores**

**N=23**

Essay Scoring Category (pre essay)				
ASC	Low	Med	High	Total
Low	4	8	2	14
High	4	5	1	10
Essay Scoring Category (post essay)				
ASC	Low	Med	High	Total
Low	2	2	4	8
High	1	14	0*	15

\*Significant at the level of  $.002 < .05$

What the table above shows is that in the pre essay only 1 student had high ASC and a high essay rating, while 2 students had high essay ratings and low ASC. For the post essay, no student had high ASC and a high essay rating, while 4 students had high essay ratings and low ASC. The chi-square analysis revealed a significant effect between high essay scores and low ASC, for the post essay. This finding is totally contrary to my predictions. However, if we look at the fact that there were only a total of three people in the high essay score range in the pre and four on the post, we can see that more students need to be in the

high essay score category. Another point of note is that 9 students moved to the medium essay score and high ASC category by curriculum's end. This observation offers a ray of hope that the heuristic of the AAVE Culture may have value for the development of (critical) literacy in African American students. Perhaps there needs to be developed more effective methods of connecting ASC to the literacy experience.

Subsequent analyses on the relationship between ASC and AAVE syntax, and ASC and Black discourse revealed no significant findings.

#### **LANGUAGE/WRITING ATTITUDES**

By the end of the curriculum, 95% of the students reported that their experience of working with and learning about AAVE was educationally valuable. The majority of the students, 83% said that they would continue experimenting with Black discourse and the language of wider communication. A large percentage, 91%, of the students said that the course experience of writing for the self and community (submitting to publication outlets about Black issues) will influence their motivation for continuing to write in the future. When compared to the (83%) pre-curriculum number who said they did not like writing this change in attitudes shows possibilities.

It is indeed difficult to get a sense of the students' experience of the curriculum from quantitative reports. For this reason, it may be helpful to look at student reflections on ways in which the learning about AAVE and the Black literacy tradition was beneficial to them:

**African # 20:**

It helped me develop a better understanding of our language and possibly why other people may not get it. I was exposed to some excellent literature.

**African #15:**

The course helped me understand more about the AAVE culture and language.

**African #21:**

This course has helped me to recognize the difference between standard english and Black english and to be able to write according to my audience.

**African #3:**

This course has helped me to identify my weakness in writing. I also feel more comfortable about my writing style and the Black discourse I use because now I have control over it.

**African #14:**

I have become more aware about the language of my people. I learned that to talk Black is not to talk improper; it is just a different way of talking. I learned to take more pride in my people and my

ancestors.

African #6:

It has opened my eyes to the struggles of African Americans. I learned to write in the language of Wider Communication and Black English. It has been very useful, and will continue to be as I pursue my English degree.

African #12:

I have learned to coincide my voice with the voice of the work I am critiquing to come up with a proper analysis of the subject.

African #19:

I honestly feel that I learn and comprehended so much information because I was learning about my people. In addition I was learning with my peers. I am happy that Sister Elaine was the instructor of this course. She knew the course material very well therefore it was easier for the class to learn. She was able to teach from her heart and soul. You don't find many instructors like that. This class has not only given me the opportunity to learn more about my culture, I have also had more confidence towards all my classes because of my new found identity.

As can be understood from the students themselves, the potential of the majority of the students was tapped. These disclosures remind us of the problem of using quantitative

measures to demonstrate change in student achievement. Even though student achievement in terms of essay scores was not significantly improved, the potential base for higher achievement has been laid. That is, the attitude affective motivation is very significant in leading to demonstrable achievement in writing skills.

#### **SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

Significant change is apparent in the essay scores of the low achieving students. From pre to post, the low group decreased by 20% while the high group doubled. Only three students remained in the low group by curriculum's end. All students' scores ranked in the medium and high categories on the polished essay. Six of the eight lowest scorers on the pre essay were sophomores. There was also a junior and a freshman in that group, suggesting that the curriculum may be beneficial at higher levels of the curriculum, rather than just at the beginning level.

The data for this project show a significant correlation between higher essay scores and higher total number of words written in the essays for the polished and post pieces. This finding may indicate that the African Centered approach has the potential to motivate students to write. Students also demonstrated significant ability to write more (an average increase of 131 words) on the post essay as compared to the pre essay. This finding implies that students may be able to write more about topics



personally meaningful to the self, or African Centered materials, or students may have learned to write more as a result of teaching strategies. Another significant and interesting finding turned up concerning the use of Black discourse. Students who scored highest on the pre essay were those who used the most Black discourse. This is similar to findings in Smitherman (1994) where she attributes this phenomenon to change in teachers' attitudes toward Black language.

Contrary to my prediction, a significant effect was found between low ASC and high essay ratings, for the post essay. It could be that the students with high ASC just need more practice with their writing. They had not developed the wherewithal to demonstrate this consciousness in writing. Also, it is probably the case that all of the students still need a lot more practice with developing their critical thinking skills, as far as African Centered thought is concerned. However, the fact that there was an increase in number of students in the medium essay scoring range with high ASC shows promise for the African Centered approach to composition.

Students reported significant attitudinal change toward writing, as determined by their written reflections on the curriculum experience. The attitude change may have been most influenced by the curriculum requirement that students submit a piece for publication. The possibility of being

published made students work hard to revise and polish. In fact, this activity influenced most students to say that they would continue to practice their writing skills for themselves and for the community about Black issues.

## Chapter 7

### **CRITIQUE ON THE PROBLEMATIC OF IMPLEMENTING AFROCENTRICITY INTO TRADITIONAL CURRICULUM: "THE POWERS THAT BE"**

This chapter provides a subjective reflection on the implementation of the African Centered composition curriculum into the traditional curriculum. The overview is offered to provide insight into the problems and pleasures of overcoming "the powers that be." The implementation of African Centered curriculum is complex because of the complex past and present of African Americans. In their quest for equality and freedom, African Americans have taken diverse positions on the best way to "make it" in America. The diversity within the African American community brings with it the clash of diverse ideologies and class intersections. Some are from the Black middle or upper classes, or the mainstream middle or upper classes. Many African American students are still the first in their families to "make it" to a university. Their ideas of "making it" in academia influence the academic personas they adopt, or have been trained to adopt. For the most part, all African Americans come from private and public schools with four hundred plus years of stereotypes hanging over their heads. Most did not escape the experience of miseducation. For as many African Americans that come to college "prepared," an equal or greater amount arrive ill-prepared for college-level work. This idea of preparedness

is in and of itself telling. Most come prepared to experience another four or more years of miseducation.

Adding another dimension to the difficulty in introducing students to the intellectual validity of African ways of thought is the fact that they have been indoctrinated into the precepts of European American Centered ways of knowing. Add to this the fact that African American anything is controversial. For all of the above reasons, the experience of implementing African Centered education into the traditional curriculum is difficult.

One of the most basic premises of African Centered education is that there is value in many ways of knowing and that there is an essential African orientation to knowledge. The push for multicultural and African Centered education should not be seen as a push to eradicate the best that European American education has to offer, but as an expansion of the world's knowledge base. However, America's educational system is traditionally Eurocentric, advancing the idea that the only kind of education that will lead to success in today's highly technological world must be grounded in the European orientation to knowledge.

The African Centered composition curriculum developed for this study consisted of various exercises designed to sensitize students to the conflicting and complementary aspects of AAVE Culture and the dominant or LWC Culture. It is important to remember that we studied both cultures from

the stance that language reflects worldview: self, history, ideology and culture. In one sense, the curriculum moved along as planned, but the time of year and meeting time caused several unanticipated adjustments. The curriculum was implemented during Spring Semester, 1996. Spring Semester runs from the second week of January through the last week of April. My class met on Thursdays from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. February was filled with Black history events. Programming night, as I found out during that semester, was Thursday. Most events began at 7:00 p.m. How could I offer a course claiming to be African Centered and not have the students hear important elders of the American African community? The two events that we attended were talks by Molefi Asante [credited with explicating and theorizing Afrocentricity and coining the term] and Dick Gregory [political activist, satirist, nutritionist etc.]. Whenever students' schedules permitted, we had class on an alternate night so that we could attend events; however, the Dick Gregory talk served as one of our classes.

In another sense, the curriculum, as students delved into it, took on a life of its own. I could not anticipate the restlessness that the curriculum would create in the classroom atmosphere. The first class did not give me a glimpse as it served basic introductory purposes (i.e. completion of questionnaires, introductions, overview of course and syllabus). But from the second week onward, I

noticed something that I had not anticipated. Students were at once liberated and bewildered. As AAVE Culture was presented to the students, they were sometimes so excited that they would begin talking in pockets among themselves. For example, a student would be responding to a probe only to be cut off and drowned out by an eruption of dissonant and unharmonic voices. Students were bewildered because indeed it was very difficult for them to explore their Blackness. The idea that Black anything is nothing was so deeply embedded into their consciousnesses that their behaviors sometimes reflected this sad truth.

The curriculum was based in the belief that learning to read the self or a world personally meaningful to the self would enhance critical literacy skills. Implicit in this belief is the assumption that students have an already-formed knowledge-base about themselves. However, the overriding already-formed knowledge-base that became apparent was negative. I submit that this premise: "Black anything is nothing" is pivotal to a critical understanding of the students' interaction with the curriculum and the writing produced from it. My task was huge: to counteract the racist text in the students' heads. Armed with the Black literacy tradition, I set about to root out twelve or more years of miseducation.

The curriculum began with getting the students to think about and interact with the enslavement narratives: James

Albert Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass and the Slave girl's story. The development of critical reading skills was a major aspect of the curriculum. The belles lettres literary style of 18th Century literature coupled with signification proved difficult for the students. The pace of the curriculum had to be adjusted to fit the needs of the students. It became apparent at the beginning of this section of the curriculum that students would benefit from in-class close textual analysis and directed reading. Our reading of the texts, Gronniosaw and Equiano, exemplified the importance of critical reading as they introduced the students to the master trope of the Black literacy tradition, signification. Students were encouraged to focus on Gronniosaw's quest to be able to read his world, literally, his struggle to learn to read--the Bible. As previously mentioned, signifying can be used to revise themes pertinent to the Black experience. The Talking Book Trope (literacy as freedom), or a variation of it, is a major recurring theme of the Black experience, and it occurred in all the texts that we read. The AAVE literary version of it originated in Gronniosaw. The trope involves Gronniosaw's fascination with his master's ability to read the Bible or a prayer book. In stolen moments Gronniosaw puts his ear to the book hoping to communicate with it as his master had. Ashamed of his ignorance and aware that he is seen as subhuman, Gronniosaw connects his inability to

read to his Blackness. His life goal is to become literate and to transform his status from object to human speaking subject. The transcendent self is literate or at least articulate and thus worthy to be free (Gates, 1988:167).

Getting the students to connect their own experience as African Americans to narratives of the enslaved Africans was hard. From the texts we extrapolated themes of the Black experience such as assimilation, identity politics/double consciousness, self doubt, racism, oppression, religion, struggle for self determination etc. Our discussions of the texts centered around connecting these themes to contemporary Black life. Some students were not aware of the problematics within these themes, while some went to the other extreme making claims that they could not back up in a sustained argument. This observation will be clearer below in the discussion of the first academic essay assignment.

Not only were students expected to become familiar with structural signification--formal revision of a theme of the Black Experience, but also signification in the sense of critiquing an imbalance of power--semantic inversion. A passage from Equiano in which Equiano describes the customs of his Nigerian culture before his enslavement displays this type of signification. Students were encouraged to focus on the following excerpt from Equiano to get a feel for this Black language device:

...[O]ur children were named from some event, some



circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth. I was named Olaudah, which, in our language, signifies "vicissitude or fortunate," also, "one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken." I remember we never polluted the name of the object of our adoration; on the contrary, it was always mentioned with the greatest reverence; and we are totally unacquainted with swearing, and all those terms of abuse and reproach which find their way so readily and copiously into the language of more civilized people. (20)

Upon closer scrutiny and reflection on this passage a student blurted out, "ooh I get it!" and proceeded to explicate the passage for the class. This was indeed a high for me, to see a light beginning to go off in the students' heads.

The first assignment was to agree or disagree with five statements about the enslavement narratives and write short essay responses explaining and supporting each answer. The purpose of the assignment was to force students to conceptualize the material. The students had two weeks to work on this assignment. Below is African #24's (a female freshman's) response to a statement. Her answer was one of the more critical reflections on the texts.

Statement #1 The authors of the narratives should have emphasized themselves as human beings rather than Christians throughout their texts.  
 Agree            Disagree XX    Why?

Throughout the narratives that we have read within this class the issue of religion plays a major role in the shaping of the slave mentality. On the slave ships, to the plantation, and even today Christianity is constantly being pushed down the throat's of Black Americans. Religion, in a sense has done a great job in keeping the

subservient mine-set of the slave present. The narrators often try to present themselves as Christian first because from homeland to plantation, they had been persuaded to believe that Christianity symbolized everything that was good.

The Christian religion attempts to convey the ideology of the pie in the sky. If you are a "good Christian" your rewards will be attained in the after life. Thus they are lead to endure the cruel and inhumane treatment of their Christian brothers. The Christian way of life being portrayed to Gronniosaw and many others was not the same one that was spoke of in the Bible. A prime example of this is when Gronniosaw over heard the "Christian" captain say that if he was not sold, he would be thrown overboard. The Bible clearly states "thou shalt not kill" and also "thou shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." The loyal Christian Black slaves were shown not mercy nor brotherly love from their white counterpart.

Throughout several text, the humanization of the Black slave was placed second to the last behind the masters profit. With this in mind it is much easier to dehumanize the Black slave and lower their self-worth. In a Slave Girl's story, it is apparent that she estimates her self worth to be weak and deficient in mental powers. "God in His love to me and for me can own such a feeble one."

As this was the first assignment, several students had no idea of the level of thought or analysis that was expected, although I repeatedly stated that I expected a lot! This response was one of the best of the bunch. This student is a thinker. Although the writing evinces some technical problems, her answer reveals critical thought.

As for the other enslavement narratives, the students found Douglass to be the most accessible text. Some complained that Slave girl's story seemed too accommodating

to whites. And on the level of readability, they found it hard to follow because of the text's adherence to oral strategies. I saw the students' frustration with the text as an opportunity to critically analyze the context of Drumgoold's text. I asked the class who they thought was Drumgoold's target audience, pointing out that the number of literate Blacks was disproportionately low during that time as compared to whites. One student said "her text was written for Blacks and whites because she wanted to uplift Blacks, by showing whites that she could think and write."

Another student pointed out that Drumgoold's obsession with talking about her love for her "white mother" (an uncommonly kind mistress who had all but adopted Drumgoold) was generated by her knowledge of the text's function. As a Black female, Drumgoold hoped to generate empathy for the cause of freedom and literacy. Her text stressed her experience of human equality with whites and human ability to achieve even in the face of adversity. Drumgoold's text offered a prime example of audience awareness and the rhetoric of unity. Drumgoold knew that her text was going to be used as a tool for abolition. Drumgoold wrote extensively about her "white mother" and how much the white mother loved and cared for her. I told students that of course there were whites who helped Blacks achieve literal literacy. Drumgoold's mistress was rich and powerful and could afford to educate her Black "daughter" without risking

her own life or that of her daughter. She devoted a considerable amount of her text to thanking God for her "mother" and her literacy. Drumgoold's text stressed a concern for the literacy training of all Blacks. After discussion of audience, purpose and the conditions under which Kate Drumgoold's text (Slave girl) was produced, we decided that her text was nevertheless a critique of the system, and therefore worthy of all of their attention.

In conjunction with the enslavement narratives students watched selected excerpts from the movie Roots: Kunte's socialization from African to American "nigga"; the slave owners' discussion of the Africans' intellectual capacity (compared to "bears taught to dance"), the white woman's social standing; Kunte's (un) naming (severe beating into new reality); Kizzy's literacy education (taught by white mistress)--and the price for that literacy (being sold away from family). In order to prepare students for the first academic essay assignment, the background knowledge base was constructed by the readings, viewing and discussion of Roots, an ink-shedding writing activity, discussion of themes of the Black experience as presented in the texts, mini-lectures on the Black literacy quest, discussion of Smitherman handout on AAVE and the Black experience. The ink shedding activity was devised as a prewriting strategy for the first academic essay. The activity consisted of

writing on a question in-class for twenty minutes or so. The question was: In what ways is your experience as an African American similar to any you've read about thus far? After the allotted time, students were instructed to pass their papers around and comment on each other's writing. The commentary should seek to broaden the writer's perspective, offer ideas or examples for development, or it may just provide encouragement for what has been written. All of this served as a prewriting activity to the actual essay. The mini-lectures on the American African literacy quest consisted of information about socio-political structures that shape the Black experience, literacy laws--denying literacy etc.

We also defined the academic essay as a special kind of writing, with a special form, expected of all students in the academy. The essay has a title that orients readers to an interesting way of viewing the topic. The essay consists of introduction to the topic--containing easily identifiable thesis statement, body paragraphs--explaining the topic. The essay has topic sentences in the body of the paper--guiding the reader while extending the idea(s) being put forth. The essay ends with a conclusion which drives the main points home. The essay should express independent

thought with clarity, grace, and force<sup>5</sup>. For the academic essay, (not the pre essay which was given the first night of class) students were to do the following:

Discuss the lives of any of the enslaved Africans: Gronniosaw, Equiano, Drumgoold, Kizzy, Kunte Kinte, Douglass. Connect their experience as an African in America to your own.

Students were allotted time in and out of class to write several drafts of the paper to enhance idea development and final draft quality. It is interesting to note that this assignment proved problematic for several students.

One student in particular, Bi-African #9 wrote a very superficial paper about how she couldn't relate to the experiences of the Africans because she was biracial. After all of the background knowledge and context provided to counteract miseducation, I saw this as clear resistance to the curriculum. I directed her to re-read Douglass which discussed the creation of classism and the development of the mulatto class in the enslaved African communities and his own suspected biraciality. Further, there was discussion of Black-white relations in Gronniosaw. After subsequent discussions on the matter and rereading of the texts, the student managed to write a paper directly addressing the topic.

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Language borrowed from Michigan State's American Thought and Language (ATL) expository writing grading sheet.

Even more puzzling than that situation is that of African #23, a junior, journalism major who said she did not see any of the structures of the past in the current experience of Blacks. In other words, she said she had no knowledge or experiences of oppression or institutional racism. Upon learning of this, I read Peggy McIntosh's article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" to the class. This article stirred up a lot of conversation. The ironic part about it is that it took a white person's testimony about the subject to give credibility to a sentiment that the student had been exposed to by several enslavement narratives. I attributed some of her resistance to her training in journalism which is to write objectively. Not that objectivity is bad, but this student's writing had that distanced researched-feel to it. Her writing seemed to reflect the sentiment "only the traditionally accepted facts please!" It was as if she had been trained never to reveal her own thoughts. Her academic posture was that of the "good student." As revealed in her responses to the language/writing questionnaire, most of the characteristics which she associated with good writing are formal or superficial aspects of writing. There is no mention of idea development, creativity, or interesting use of language. I attribute another part of the student's resistance simply to the fact that this African Centered

curriculum posed an opposition to everything the student had been trained to think and write. Needless to say, this student turned in several unacceptable drafts before she achieved one that revealed some semblance of her own thought as influenced by the context provided by the curriculum.

The following is an example of academic essay assignment #1. It was written by African #12 and demonstrates some command of written LWC and knowledge of essay form. Although I would have liked to have seen more development of the student's analysis of religion for Blacks from a critical standpoint, it begins to scratch the surface in that direction. This female freshman student grew up in an all Black neighborhood and attended an urban high school. She had had two writing classes--one developmental writing course and one university writing intensive humanities course. The paper received two critiques before submission: a fellow colleague's and mine. In the peer writing groups, we discussed writing rubrics. All students were given a rubric and were asked to write on a colleague's essay the score that they would assign the essay if it had to be turned in on that day (not the due date). We used Smitherman's sheet on syntax to inform our knowledge of AAVE grammar. Students were asked to pay special attention to point out any AAVE grammar in each other's essays, and to offer suggestions for idea development. She writes:



### Freedom through Religion

Religion is the most important thing in my life. It is a set beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, generally agreed upon by a number of persons. Agreeing with this statement, I also feel that religion includes having a stable relationship with God, and always knowing you have someone to count on when no one else is there. Religion was used as a moral argument by the oppressors to justify the horrid condition and the concept of slavery. Although religion was used to oppress Africans and justify their lowly position in slavery, Africans took this very thing and redefined it to suit their African quest for freedom. There are a handful of things that fall under religion that I keep in a little pocket in my mind and my heart. I have held them so close to me that I have forgotten that they are there. These three things are the Lord's Prayer, gospel songs, and the Ten Commandments. Out of the readings I have read so far, the Narrative of Frederick Douglass has been similar to my religious experiences as an African American.

In the past, the enslaved Africans used religious songs to free their hearts of the oppressors. In chapter 2 of the Narrative, Douglass spoke of Northerners who felt that the singing among slaves was evidence of contentment of happiness. The song of the enslaved African actually represented the sorrows of his heart. These songs were a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. Douglass said that these songs were so strong that they did more to some minds than the readings of whole volumes on the subject of captivity (Narrative, 263).

My inheritance of song is much similar to that of the enslaved African. Along with the Lord's prayer, I believe that gospel songs are my own protection against evil and condemnation. Songs such as "Precious Lord," "Jesus is the center of my joy" are songs I sing to uplift my spirits and remind me that the Lord makes everything okay. The songs and prayer do for me what a bedtime story does for a child. They help me to relax and clear my mind of all the things that I have done for that day. After a while I

forget my sorrows. I no longer feel as if someone has a foot on my chest holding me down. The only thing that really occurs to me is the fact that I am saying my prayer or singing my songs.

Many slave owners felt that the institution of slavery was justified in the bible by the verse, "It is the order of Providence that one man should become subservient to another." They used this verse and turned it into the "Devil's Commandment." this verse can be interpreted in many ways, such as a woman should perform the things asked by her husband, or a government which does not practice democracy. My interpretation of this particular quote is that the slave owners believed that it was perfectly within their rights to hold another man as a slave. If this interpretation was true, then who was to say who should become subservient to whom?

The way slave owners used the bible to justify slavery is the way I use the Ten Commandments to tell me how I should respect and appreciate others. Laws such as, "thou shall not lie," "honor thy mother and father," and "thou shall not steal" give me a sense of what is right. I rarely think of the purpose of these laws, unless I am facing a moral dilemma. Just as ignorant slave owners felt they would be breaking the law of God by not having slavery, is the same way I feel about the Ten Commandments. If I did not obey any of these laws, I feel I would be breaking God's rules and the government's rules. No matter whose rules I break, I will be punished.

Religion has been an important part in the lives of ancestors and my life as well. Although some people misunderstood its meaning, everyone had some form of belief in the way the universe should be ran and in a higher being. Without my religious background, I would not be here today. The struggles that my ancestors encountered so that I may be free today, give me a sense of pride to see that their prayers to God were answered. While no aspect of slavery was positive, one of the fortunate outcomes was the emergence of an historic figure such as Frederick Douglass. This brave individual, as well as others, have proved that things can only hold you down temporarily. That is why I am looking further into my religion and African American people so I can become more educated. But, it does not matter how much

education I have if I do not have discipline and aspirations for myself. If I do not stand for something, then I will fall for anything. I plan to become a very successful young lady and I cannot afford to fall for everything. This is why I keep the Lord's Prayer, gospel songs, and the Ten Commandments in a little pocket in my mind and my heart.

Although we had discussed writing rubrics and expectations for college-level writing, the student was disappointed by the grade of 2.5 I assigned based on my interpretation of the rubric. The week before submission, her colleagues had given her 3.5 and 4.0. My guess is that in view of the scores her colleagues had assigned she did no further revision. In my commentary, I pointed out that some ideas still needed development. I told her that I thought her insecurity about writing, something she stressed in the language/writing attitudes questionnaire and in class constantly, caused her to begin editing too soon before giving herself a chance to further explore and critically analyze ideas about religion. This student and others repeatedly lamented that this class was a "white bashing" class. She felt that the students who wrote "racist stuff about white folks" got better grades. In fact, two students commented in the exit language/writing questionnaire that they thought their writing was not appreciated by me because I made them "revise, revise again, and re-revise" papers that did not conform to my ideology. Throughout the semester

I stressed to the students that all of us had white friends and relatives that we loved and that the class was not about hating white folks, but learning to be critical thinkers.

Smitherman's "Chain Remain the Same," "Forms of things Unknown," and Mitchell-Kernan's "Signifying and Marking" were to sensitize students to Black language and discourse. Smitherman's articles served us doubly by providing explication of Black language devices and by her own incorporation of the Black discourse style in her texts. In connection with "Chain Remain..." by Smitherman students brought in contemporary raps and explained (a) facet(s) of Black language. This exercise proved difficult, as students were asked to explain only those aspects of Black language that were pertinent to written texts. In other words, they couldn't explain phonological aspects, only value-centered devices or structural devices--signifying, flippin the script, braggadoccio, tonal semantics, narrative sequencing, testifyin'.

On another level, I was surprised that several students brought in raps that were obscene. Although many would argue that that is acceptable, many of the same artists who have obscene lyrics have other mainstream songs, that do not denigrate and exploit the plight of Black people under the guise of "that's the way it is" and capitalism. I believe elders of the AAVE community, myself included, should

encourage students to look to the best of what AAVE Culture has to offer. I saw their uninhibitedness to bring in this kind of "art" as resistance to the study of AAVE Culture as a worthwhile intellectual enterprise.

After about the third presentation of this kind, I intervened and preached a sermon on their failure to wake up and recognize their compliance in their own oppression. This sentiment was concurred by one of my supervising professors observing the class on that night. I believe that African Americans comply in their own oppression when we become desensitized to our plight as the struggle to overcome "the powers that be." I believe we comply in our own oppression when our cultural artifacts become commercialized into a commodity from which corporate America benefits at our expense. Rap started out being political, about nation building and consciousness raising. It stressed the strength and ability of Blacks to redefine and achieve. It also stressed Blacks' ability to survive and flourish in hostile conditions. Of course, there was always the rap that celebrated AAVE Culture. What I am calling celebratory rap features rappers showing off their verbal prowess by rhyming in time about their looks, women, men (for female rappers) their rap ability etc. I am not a holy roller, but common sense dictates that the ability to think and use language is what makes us uniquely human. Our level of human

development is contingent upon what we put into our heads. It takes a lot of mental work to transform obscene rap into intellectual and spiritual (development) thought food. If I ever do this exercise again, perhaps it would be wise of me to add this dimension to the exercise by having students turn obscene rap on its head and explore more of the interaction between AAVE Culture and rap.

The Black language and discourse section of the curriculum was contextualized by Smitherman's "Forms" and the Mitchell-Kernan piece. We read portions of the Mitchell-Kernan article and Smitherman's "Forms" in class as they proved hard reading for the students. Their assignment for this section of the curriculum consisted of students' bringing in an article which addressed a topic of utmost concern to the AAVE community. They were to write a piece which refuted or agreed with the article's ideas and make the discussion their own. The writing produced from this exercise had to be written in the Black discourse style (for a Black audience) and rewritten in the academic style (for an academic audience). Students were provided with the list of Black discourse features (i.e. "direct address," "ethnolinguistic idioms" etc.) from Smitherman (1994), as described in an earlier chapter. It was stressed that the Black discourse had to sound authentic. That is, students had to concentrate on discourse not grammar. AAVE grammar

was to be employed sparsely because even in Hip Hop magazines every sentence does not have AAVE grammar! One of the papers had to be sent out for publication, depending on its compatibility with a publishing outlet's audience.

One thing that this assignment made me aware of is that even the academically-styled discourse on a topic of concern to African Americans has less chance of being published in a mainstream outlet than academically-styled discourse on a topic not perceived to be "Black folks' business. This assignment was work intensive for students because they had to peruse Black and mainstream magazines and papers to scope out possible publishing outlets. This entailed getting a feel for the type of writing favored by the prospective outlets. Further, students had to research submission information on their own. They worked in groups sharing information and writing cover letters to editors for their articles. The assignment was very time consuming for me, too, as I had to do a lot of conferencing with students on their texts to oversee writing quality.

This assignment really brought to the forefront living in two worlds. As it turned out, some students had no problem writing their Black discourse-styled articles, while others did. To my knowledge, three students had pieces accepted for publication, all in Black outlets.

The following is an example of a piece (essay #2, the

publication piece--not the polished piece assessed by raters) written in the academic style. It was written by African #12. I chose to display her work again to show the student's progress, with respect to critical sensibility<sup>6</sup>. It demonstrates far more development than that of her academic essay #1 above (relating own experience to that of enslaved Africans).

### "Claiming Earth": My Opinion

Many people speak of diseases being caused by other human beings who want to destroy a certain race. What if a disease also began to destroy the race of its creators? Why wouldn't the creators of the disease begin a process to eliminate it? The disease in particular is AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). It has been said that AIDS was introduced by a monkey. Not so long ago, I saw a movie called "Outbreak." It was about a little monkey, Mutaba, who carried the disease. This monkey ended up escaping from Africa, with the help of an outsider, and infecting that outsider with this deadly disease. This disease then infected a town. When the monkey was caught, lab experts were able to find a cure for Mutaba. This movie makes me wonder why lab specialists are not able to find a cure AIDS, if they claim to know where and how it was derived.

"Claiming Earth", a chapter in a very important book titled Black Men: Single, Obsolete, and Dangerous? discusses how AIDS is associated with the Black race. This work by Haki Madhubuti discusses a professor who says he has proof that AIDS was created in a laboratory in hopes of killing off the black race, black men being the particular target. Again, I ask: Why wouldn't the creators of a disease whose people are also being killed stop these malicious deaths? Is it because

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The previous piece that I displayed by African #12 was "Freedom through Religion."



the conspiracy might be uncovered? Is not the destruction of the human race worth sacrificing silence? The answers to these questions still remain a mystery in my mind.

Although many African Americans know that the government is and always will be against them, some claims made just do not add up. Madhubuti says that there is proof of this crime, but in fact no proof that it was meant specifically for the Black race.

In closing, I would like to thank Haki Madhubuti for his contribution of knowledge to the African American society. The extinction of our race does go beyond African Americans themselves. Madhubuti has made us aware of this fact, and the fact that we need to do a lot of research for ourselves.

The following piece was written in the Black discourse style by African #1.

#### Listen Up Black People

I don't think that many of us today, young or old, realize the danger that we as Black people are facing in this racist country. The country claims that all men are created equal, but is that the truth? I think not. I'm sure you can ask any Black man in America about his plight. Our Black men are discriminated against on a daily basis, yet many stay strong and move on.

To give respect where respect is due, is something that is commonly heard, so let's give respect to the Black men in this country. Simply because of the color of their skin Black men are viewed as dangerous, violent, thieves, and poor husbands and fathers. Yet no one ever gives consideration to the actual situation of the Black man. Sure there are many in jails, which appears to me, to be a conspiracy, but there are still many others that are prominent male figures. I'm sure many of us can name outstanding men without even looking outside of our own communities. Not all of them are even adults and are still young men striving to make a change in this world.

In one of my classes not too long ago, we watched this movie that tried to show the difference between the way black and white men are

treated. I don't even think they had to show that movie. All that needed to be done was to watch television. Plain as day you can see this mistreatment. Think about it. Who are the majority of men on television as they happy husbands? Who are the majority of men on the news involved in crimes? This is interesting because the Black men are always the thieves and drug dealers, but the white men are the ones who are killing people and eating them. Now who are the real bad guys? I'd beg to differ with anyone who thinks a thief is worse than a cannibalist. What can we do though?

Incidents happen daily that reflect how Black men are mistreated because of the color of their skin. I'm sure that we all can think of a time when it has happened to us. I know I'll never forget the first time my boyfriend and I walked pass a van in broad day light when the woman inside locked her doors. It made me so angry that I just wanted to kick her butt. I guess she thought we wanted something she had. I remember being so upset because of her actions while my boyfriend who had it happen before thought little of it. It was obvious that she locked the doors because of us. For no apparent reason she felt threatened. It makes me sick to think of how Blacks are viewed in this society.

There is no one solution to the problems that Black men face, just as there is no one solution to world peace. As a people we need to free ourselves from the mess that the power elite of America got us into. They brought us here from our native land to serve and pledge allegiance to a country that has given us nothing but pain. It is now time to get free and unite our strong minds as one so that we as a whole, can begin to prosper.

This student, African #1, was one of those who had a hard time writing in the Black discourse style. She had her academic version published in a Black Philadelphia local paper.

When I reflected on some of the students' comments

about their inability to write Black, (and many complained), I began to think that maybe only certain students could benefit from such an approach. But upon deeper reflection, I still believe it is a good exercise because it emphasizes the kind of language use that is in conflict with the academic style. Nevertheless, African #1 managed to use tonal semantics-- "stay strong and move on"; ethnolinguistic idiom and aphorism--"give respect where respect is due" [and] "plain as day"; field dependency (evident in the register and first person posture); direct address--"Think about it" followed by a series of questions; and Narrative sequencing/testifyin--the story about her boyfriend's and her incident with unjust prejudice.

The next set of exercises that students did centered on signifying or indirection. Here, we concentrated on Mitchell-Kernan's discussion on the formal features of signification: the message must be obscured (could refer to more than one person), message pivots on shared knowledge which can be extrapolated from cultural symbols or language use that means something different (or nothing) to members of the AAVE Culture than it does to members of the dominant culture. Students were asked to write a letter to a close friend who is also a member of the AAVE Culture who has a personal problem. They were to imagine they are aware of the problem and must bring the problem to the attention of

the friend, indirectly. This same letter was re-written in the LWC direct style, to a person with whom the writer is unfamiliar, and who is not a member of the AAVE Culture. The assignment was aimed at getting students to think about underlying assumptions and to be explicit in their academic writing. Needless to say, students had a hard time coming up with original ideas because usually signification is spontaneous and is done without thinking about the shared knowledge between the individuals involved which makes the speech act successful. It was hard for me to facilitate this exercise because the students wanted me to do the thinking for them. I refused because an important point of the assignment was to get them to explore what it is that makes Black language happen, the shared experience of its constituents. Most of the students wound up styling their signification on examples provided by Mitchell-Kernan. Below is an example of one of the better signifying letters by African #10.

Dear Abdul,

Certain people for many years have been looking down on others, but it's time to do the things that we are accustomed to. There are always going to be people that can't get used to the way others act because they are not used to their ways. Some of our kind think there is a certain type of conduct when around these people. I think that folks should be themselves and accept the differences in others. All we wanna do is have some fun, laugh and enjoy each other. We can't help it. It's in our blood. For instance,

when you go to the cafeteria just do what you've got to do and enjoy yourself. Let there be no shame in your game, and don't take anything from anyone that you don't like. I'm not worried though. I know you don't like "Oreos and Crackers." Peace!

Your ace boon coon

The indirect message is that it is all right to "act Black" or be oneself in the presence of whites. The stereotype is that Black folks who talk and laugh loud in public are low class or ignorant and those who don't are "Oreos." The direct version of this letter spelled out these underlying assumptions.

By the end of the curriculum, students were evenly split in their thinking on the easiest language to write in. Only four students reported that they still did not believe AAVE was a language and that they didn't see how learning about it could help their academic writing or contribute to their education.

What I have tried to do here is offer a reflection on the students and their interaction with the curriculum. Although there are many issues and difficulties surrounding the implementation of an African Centered curriculum into the traditional university curriculum, I believe that most students benefitted from the experience. In fact, I think that the problems encountered in implementing African Centered curriculum into the university curriculum attest to

the need for Afrocentricity in Kindergarten through university level educational institutions, to counteract the monocultural influence of traditional orientation to the making of knowledge or "the powers that be."

## CHAPTER 8

### IMPLICATIONS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

This study investigated the implications of the centering of the language and culture of the African American community into their literacy experience as a method of teaching academic discourse. The study also investigated the relevance of African Self Consciousness in the development of critical literacy.

Analysis indicates that the low achieving students made the most progress from pre to post. A number of interesting considerations can be drawn from this finding. The "low achievers" were those whose prose on the pre essay did not conform to the conventions and demands of college level academic discourse. The biggest factor inhibiting high ratings for the "low achievers'" essays was length. On the other hand, the high achievers were those whose essays were longer and employed the most amount of Black discourse. The curriculum requirement of sending out a piece for publication concerning an issue of importance to the Black community motivated students to write and re-write. Consider these factors along with Redd's (1991) finding that Black students "style" more or employ more Black discourse features for Black audiences. In doing so, one may conclude that low as well as high achieving African American students may be more inclined to develop their writing skills if their writing is directly/functionally connected to issues

which concern the African American community. This is not to suggest that African American students be allowed to write texts that are inaccessible to the larger community, for indeed the larger community needs to be informed of the concerns of the Black community. What deserves further exploration is the development of accessible yet authentic Black voices that can articulate and critically analyze the issues of Black American life. I think it is important that the Black voice be cultivated and nurtured. Teaching strategies and theories need to be worked out with that specific goal in mind.

Academic writing need not be an academic exercise. It must be connected to the world beyond the classroom. Indeed this is an aspect of the African Centered curriculum that should be amplified. More time and attention should be allotted to working on polished pieces for publication. Recall that all students' scores ranked in the medium and high categories on the polished essay. This leads one to rethink the design of the study. If we look only at the pre to post gain in essay scores, it appears that students' only achieved slight improvement in their writing ability. Although it is not realistic to think that a large amount of improvement can be gained in only one semester, a more realistic portrait of students' achievement might be seen in their polished essays. So, it may be profitable to concentrate on publication of polished pieces and assessment



of polished pieces in further studies in this area.

There definitely needs to be further exploration of the concept of African Self Consciousness and writing. The relationship between low ASC and high essay ratings, for the post essay, is puzzling. It was found that high essay scores correlated positively with low ASC. The raters for the students' essays were chosen on the basis that they were well aware and conscious of the plight of the Black student writer in academia. So, the focus of attention cannot be there. Given the fact that there were only a total of three people in the high essay score range in the pre and four on the post, we can see that more students need to be in the high essay score category. Another point of note is that nine students did move into the medium essay score and high ASC category by curriculum's end. This observation offers a ray of hope that the heuristic of the AAVE Culture may have value for the development of (critical) literacy in African American students. Perhaps there needs to be developed more effective methods of connecting ASC to the literacy experience. Although some would argue that four people did have good writing skills without high ASC, I still believe that the students who did have high ASC just needed time to develop its application to writing. I believe the African Centered approach offers possibilities. It may motivate them to develop and sharpen their skills.

#### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

In any experimental research, external factors cannot be controlled. For example, two of my best students got sick toward the end of the curriculum and were unable to do their best work on the post essay. In the critique of this curriculum provided to me by two literacy experts, the amount and difficulty of reading material for the curriculum was questioned. Both reviewers suggested fewer readings. One of the reviewers even suggested that the use of only contemporary texts such as the works of Terry McMillan or BeBe Moore Campbell might influence the outcome of such a study. Our inability to have computers in our classroom was disadvantageous for a course so writing intensive. There were eight writing assignments over the course of fifteen weeks. In agreement with the reviewers, I think that in any replication of this study, the amount of writing should be reduced. Or to put it another way, the focus of the writing should be reduced to publication of polished pieces. This may allow students more opportunities to sharpen and polish their writing skills. Further, as mentioned above, the possibility of publication serves as motivation for revision.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study is believed to be the first African Centered approach to teaching composition since Baxter & Reed's study in the mid seventies. I have sought here to encourage further research into the implementation of Afrocentricity

further research into the implementation of Afrocentricity into composition instruction. From this research, the following areas of inquiry deserve further exploration: 1) development of African Centered curriculum and materials; 2) the effect of writing for publication on motivation for writing and revision; 3) experimentation with the most effective Black discourse devices and how to cultivate their development; 4) the development of research designed to detect student characteristics that are complementary with African Centered instructional materials.

First, it would be advantageous to generate a store of African Centered materials that are tried and true. Second, as far as publication and revision are concerned, I noticed that my students did not mind calling me or hunting me down to get feedback on the pieces that they were to send out for publication. The impetus of writing for the community may provide the motivation necessary for Black students with low motivation and confidence to hone their writing skills. Third, as my study showed, some Black discourse features may outweigh the use of those most in conflict with academic discourse such as field dependency. Field dependency deserves fuller exploration because it may be that the cognitive style that it represents is becoming more acceptable. Fourth, it may be that certain kinds of students benefit more from African Centered materials and methods. Although I have no particular type of African

American student in mind, I think it could be related to social experiences or even age. Fifth, just because I could not prove that there is a connection between ASC and critical literacy development does not mean it does not exist. Perhaps a different instrument needs to be developed that can monitor the connection between both constructs.

#### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Of course this study was exploratory. Although there were many problems, the study points to possibilities. I believe that this approach is useful because it rewards students for the culture that they bring to the classroom. For those students who have been "trained" to think that they are just human and not a member of AAVE Culture, this approach offers to them the examples of the tradition of their forebears in which "successful" Blacks are obligated to work for the economical, social, cultural and political uplift of all African people. Further, as my students realized, the African Centered curriculum is intellectually challenging. Even the students who tried to resist it found the mode of inquiry to be difficult. I believe this mode of inquiry and reflection has the potential to build critical literacy skills. I think that upper as well as lower classmen can benefit from such an approach.

I became frustrated many times during the course of implementing the curriculum. The source of my frustration was not due to students' failure to learn what I wanted them

to learn, when I wanted them to learn it, but due to my recognition of the many societal factors that tugged at my students' lives. One young lady came to me pregnant and crying, another's father had been imprisoned during the course of the semester, and one of my male students had family problems that called him away to Detroit twice toward the end of the semester. Another of my male students had to work from 10:00 p.m. through 2:30 a.m. in order to meet his expenses.

On another level, I sensed a lostness in some of the students' faces, not academic lostness, but purposelessness--no sense of direction. All of these factors point to the problem of retaining Black students in institutions of higher learning. I think Baldwin et. al.'s (1987) finding that Black academic settings or Black educational experiences increase African Self Consciousness may be a link to student achievement. Black students are struggling to define themselves in a high tech, materialistic, capitalistic society. More African Centered literacy experiences would help these students create spaces for themselves in the university and in the larger society as agents of change. For these reasons, I think it is utterly important to connect these students to literature of the enslaved African and contemporary Blacks who have achieved freedom through literacy in spite of insurmountable odds.

This study may prove helpful to any composition teacher who has Black students and is interested in becoming more knowledgeable about Black discourse practices and how to connect them to academic discourse instruction. Although I have illuminated problems involved in introducing students to the day to day struggle for Black mental liberation, I enjoyed very much working with the students. We had lots of fun signifying, calling and responding, and learning together.

**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A**

**Course Outline**

**Weeks One and Two**

**Consent Forms; Demographic and Writing Questionnaire;  
African Self Consciousness Questionnaire**

**Overview of the African-Centered curriculum;**

**Discussion of purpose and possible benefits of  
curriculum;**

**Three minute tape recorded introductions (Community  
Builder).**

**Administration of the pre essay question.**

**Class activities surrounding the enslavement narratives  
will be to discuss the major themes of the slave narratives,  
literacy as freedom, orality, humanity, and cultural  
identity.**

**Students will be asked to brainstorm unwritten codes of AAVE  
culture. Their responses may address the following  
questions: What do you do have in common with other members  
of the African American Culture? Do you ever feel  
embarrassed because of one of these commonalities? Do you  
feel it is better to identify yourself as simply American?  
Why? Do you feel obligated to help another African  
American?**

**As a group activity, students will be asked to list  
all of the characteristics they associate with AAVE Culture.  
Students will list the characteristics or events affecting**



African Americans that they are most and least proud of.

Reading assignment, Gronniosaw and Equiano's narratives. Students will be asked to keep a journal of questions that arise during their reading of these texts. As a community we will seek to answer questions.

Topics- writing style in the enslavement narratives; what good writing is. We will begin generating a writing rubric for our class. (I realize that the rubric may evolve during our reading and writing), "freedom and literacy."

Group activity, self generated questions from journals

Video, Roots, one segment which deals with naming (Kunta being beaten into his new name and reality), the other segment deals with Kizzy learning how to read and write.

Topics, the idea of freedom and language/literacy in the film excerpts and connect them to the texts we've read thus far, literacy laws.

### **Weeks Three and Four**

Self generated questions from journals

Topic-- "freedom and literacy" theme in the Slave girl's story.

Group activity-- recognition of literacy as political necessity, and audience awareness in prose as represented in the enslavement narratives. Students will be a set of five statements to which they will agree/disagree and discuss their reasons for doing so.

Handout, Smitherman's AAVE and the Black Experience chart.

Reading assignment, Narrative of Frederick Douglass.

Topic-- "freedom and literacy" theme in Douglass.

Class activity, reader response through ink shedding. The question is: In what ways is your experience similar to any you've read about thus far?

(This question will be developed into essay #1.)

Peer writing groups--instructor facilitate.

#### **Weeks Five and Six**

Reading assignment, "Chain remain..." by Smitherman.

Smitherman discusses the Black Oral Tradition of Signifying, how Black artists pay homage to one another's experience by revising songs, (as Black authors do in literature by revising themes of the Black experience--the freedom and literacy theme is the one we're focusing on in the literature--Some rap artists revise freedom and literacy also, literacy in the sense of expanded consciousness).

Assignment, copy of song lyrics that illustrate a facet of Black language as discussed in Smitherman or example of Sampling with explanation as discussed in Smitherman;

Students will present their songs to their groups;

Video, The Story of (Black) English;

Peer writing groups--instructor facilitate.

Reading assignment, "Forms of things Unknown" by Smitherman.

Topic, the Black discourse style;

Assignment, bring in an article which discusses a topic of utmost concern to the AAVE community. Present to group; Analysis of Black style in student papers contrasted with Academic Style;

Peer writing groups--instructor facilitate

#### **Weeks Seven and Eight**

Reading assignments, Mitchell-Kernan. Black speech act of signifying/indirection; Z. N. Topic, Hurston's excerpt, Black voice and signifying in writing.

Video, excerpt from the film Class Act. The film depicts the Middle-class and the working-class black and how their language and mannerisms differ, in school and out.

Begin essay #2, write letter to a popular Black magazine such as The Source or YSB arguing for or against gangsta rap, The Significance of Million Man March, The OJ Simpson Acquittal or topic of urgency to the Black community (Their article that they've already presented serves as the basis for this) using the Black discourse style. The same letter will be written to Newsweek or to a local newspaper using the academic style/ LWC. (Submission of Essay #1)

Reading assignment, Angelou & Cochran.

Topic, "freedom and literacy" in these writings.

Begin writing Essay #2a

Peer writing groups--instructor facilitate.

#### **Weeks Nine and Ten**

Revisions of written assignments.

Assignment, bring in possible publishing outlets for essays 2 and 2a.

Reading assignments, "Political inaction shouldn't have to be a Black thing," in CP and Source editorial excerpts, "Mumia Abu-Jamal" in CP.

Topic, Black voice mixed with the LWC style in Black contemporary magazines.

Topic, indirection, an AAVE discourse strategy; verbal signification and indirection in written texts.

Writing assignment (indirection), students will imagine that they have a close friend who is also a member of the AAVE culture who has a personal problem. They must imagine they are aware of the problem and feel that they could give the friend advice on how to solve it, but feel it is not their business to do so. They will write an anonymous letter to this friend in which they make points indirectly. In doing this students will be asked to draw on cultural values and shared knowledge. Prewriting activity, brainstorm all the reasons why advice cannot or should not be given directly. Rewrite in the LWC direct style, to a person with whom the writer is unfamiliar, and who is not a member of the AAVE culture.

Reading assignment, Makes me wanna holler. Young Black male's descent to criminal life and his resurrection to the mainstream, the struggles of "making it" in white America; Topic/discussion, relate to your Black

experience;

Peer writing groups--instructor facilitate

**Weeks 11 and 12**

Topics, educational depictions in the texts we've read, especially in McCall's text; adaptation to the mainstream as discussed in McCall and others;

Reading assignment, Autobiography of Malcolm X;

Topic, "freedom and literacy" in X's text;

Groups lead discussions on struggles in each authors texts by authors;

Send out essay 2/2a to publishing outlet;

**Writing Conferences**

Self generated questions from journals;

Reading Assignments, "Black sexuality" and "Black rage"

Cornel West, "Language in a Democratic State" by June Jordan;

In Class reading assignment, "Gangsta rappers get bum rap";

Topics, Afroamericanization of youth; power of language; capitalism

Begin essay #3-- interpretation and critique of passage by Bormann--explain the ideal approach to a persuasive campaign to reform race relations in the U.S. Use whatever literature sources needed for support of argument.

**Writing Conferences**

**Weeks 13 and 14**

Topics, male/female relationships in the Black

community and as presented by Sista Souljah in No disrespect, problems for women in Souljah and enslavement narratives as reflected in their texts, Language use in Souljah;

Reading Assignment, "Living in two worlds" by Marcus Mabry;

Peer writing groups

Writing Conferences

Video, Higher Learning.

Topic/Discussion, miseducation of African Americans; student-motivated learning and the dangers of being disconnected from your cultural group's history and traditions.

Topic, comparison of the issues in the movie with literacy education in our lives.

Portfolios Due, All Revisions ;

Exit interviews;

Administration of African Self Consciousness Scale

Final Nondiagnostic in class

Appendix B

Course Syllabus

**ENGLISH 290 AFRICAN-CENTERED WRITING WORKSHOP<sup>7</sup>**  
**Spring 1996 (3) SEMESTER CREDITS**

**Instructor:**

Elaine Richardson, Ph.D. Candidate, English/African  
American Language and Literacy, MSU, 3-6801, 3-9822,  
3-9252  
Office, Morrill Hall 214; Hours, W 1:00-2:30; Th 1:00-  
2:30 or by appointment; Morrill 221 if not in office

**Books:**

Books available at Revealers of Hidden Truth (E.  
Ellison)  
Course Packet (CP) available at Budget Printing  
(Trowbridge)

Makes me wanna holler Nathan McCall  
The autobiography of Malcolm X Haley and X  
No Disrespect Sista Souljah  
The classic slave narratives (CSN) (Ed.) H.L. Gates

**Location:**

Room 107, Bessey Hall

**Time**

7:00-10:00 p.m. Thursdays

**Workshop Description and Objectives:**

This workshop is designed to focus on African-Centered  
writings and topics. Participants are expected to  
produce essays and "think" pieces on a regular basis  
throughout the course. So come prepared to write!

The workshop has the following objectives:

1. To enhance participants' writing and editing  
skills, toward the goal of producing and publishing  
African-Centered writings.

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<sup>7</sup>Use only with author's permission

2. To overview theory and research on Black literacy and heighten awareness of the Black literacy tradition.
3. To develop strategies for employing writing for critical analysis and the acquisition of knowledge of self and society.
4. To develop strategies for writing for the Academy.

**Topics:**

**Main topic is Blacks and literacy; However, the following will be explored as they relate to Black literacy:**

**Black education, racism and oppression, Black music (blues, jazz, "gangsta" rap, hip hop), The Black family; Male/Female relationships, Black Culture.**

**Relationship between African American Vernacular English and literacy: myths and realities**

**Writing practices and standards in educational institutions**

**Writing from an Afrocentric perspective**

**Requirements:**

1. Produce three (3) final draft essays, one of which should be sent out to the media for publication. The essays will constitute your writing portfolios for the class.
2. Written critique of all essays by one or more of your peers.
3. Participation in peer writing group.
4. Submit one article concerning African Americans. Present it to your group and use it as the basis for one of your (3) essays.
5. Submit song lyrics featuring Black Language devices. Present it to the class.
6. Keep a weekly journal in which you raise questions and document your thoughts on readings.
7. Keep all writing in a folder/portfolio--turn in at end of semester.



8. Attend all classes unless you dead!

**Grading:**

Essays (#1, #2, #2a, #3, #4) 10 points each =50%  
 Assignments (#1, #2, #3, #4, #5) 10 points each =50%  
 Attendance will be taken into consideration for  
 borderline cases.

**Calendar:**

1/11 7:00-10:00	Consent Forms; Entrance questionnaire; African self consciousness questionnaire; Overview of African-Centered curriculum; 3 min. Introductions (Community Builder); "Non Diagnostic Essay;" Reading Assignment <u>J. Albert Gronniosaw</u> in (CP) & <u>Equiano</u> in <u>CSN</u> pp. ix-66, 166- 182; Book Buying-Bro. Eric Ellison-- Revealers of Truth
1/18 7:00-10:00	AAVE culture exercise and discussion Self generated questions (groups) "Freedom through literacy" in <u>Equiano</u> & <u>Gronniosaw</u> , Video--excerpts from <u>Roots</u> . Literacy laws; Writing rubric generation; Reading Assignment-Introduction to <u>Six</u> <u>women's slave narratives</u> and "A slave girl's story" (Both in CP)
1/25 7:00-10:00	Self generated questions from journal Agree/Disagree exercise on <u>Equiano</u> <u>Gronniosaw</u> , <u>Slave girl's story</u> ; Reading Assignment-"Narrative of Frederick Douglass" in <u>CSN</u> ; Handout-AAVE and the Black Experience (Smitherman)
2/1 7:00-10:00	Self generated questions--Freedom through literacy; Reader response through ink shedding)--question: In what ways is your experience as an African American similar to any you've read about thus far? (This question will be developed into essay #1)

**Reading Assignment--"Chain remain..." by  
Smitherman (CP);**

**2/8 7:00-10:00**

**Draft--Essay#1  
Assignment**

Bring in copy of contemporary song lyrics that illustrate a facet of Black Language as discussed in Smitherman/Bring in two songs which play off of each other by different artists. Present to your group.

**Video--The Story of (Black) English,  
Peer--response--editing groups**

**Reading Assignment--Smitherman's "Forms of things unknown"**

**2/15 7:00-10:00**

**Revisions--essay #1**

Discussion of Academic Discourse;

**Assignment**

Bring in an article which discusses a topic that you feel is of the utmost concern to the African American community and present it to your group.

**Reading Assignment Mitchell-Kernan & Z. N. Hurston, "Dust tracks.." and "Our love hate with Zora" (all in CP)**

Work on rubrics;

Peer writing groups

**2/22 7:00-10:00**

**Submit Essay #1**

Self generated questions--freedom through literacy;

Voice in Hurston;

**Video--excerpt--Class Act;**

**Begin essay #2 based on your article/topic.**

**Reading Assignment--"I know why caged" by Angelou and Johnny Cochran article (both in CP)**

**2/29 7:00-10:00**

**Revisions--essay #2.**

Voice in Angelou & Cochran

**Begin writing essay #2a in the Black Discourse style.**

**Reading Assignment--Source editorial excerpts, "Political inaction shouldn't be a Black thing" by Starling, and "Mumia Abu-Jamal" article by Emerge staff writer (all in CP) Designate a publishing outlet for paper #2/2a**

3/7 Spring Break

- 3/14 7:00-10:00 Writing workshop  
**Designate a publishing outlet for Paper#2/#2a.**  
**Submit Essay #2/2a**  
 Peer groups  
**Reading Assignment-- $\frac{1}{2}$  of Makes me wanna holler by N. McCall**
- 3/21 7:00-10:00 (In)direction exercise;  
 Freedom/Literacy in McCall;  
 AAVE culture and education in McCall;  
**Reading Assignment--last of Makes me wanna holler by N. McCall**
- 3/28 7:00-10:00 Direct exercise;  
 Freedom/Literacy in Abu-Jamal and Angelou; McCall and Cochran; Zora and Lucy Drumgoold (Slave girl).  
**Writing Conferences**  
**Reading Assignment--"Black sexuality" and "Black rage" by Cornel West & "Language in a Democratic state" by June Jordan (all in CP)**
- 4/4 7:00-10:00 Self generated questions  
 In class reading of "Gangsta rappers get bum rap"; Afroamericanization of American youth  
**Begin essay #3--interpret the passage by Bormann and explain the ideal approach of a persuasive campaign to reform race relations in this country. Use whatever sources you need to support your argument.**  
**Writing Conferences**  
 Peer writing groups--Revisions  
**Reading Assignment--No disrespect By Sista Souljah**
- 4/11 7:00-10:00 Language use in Souljah; Black male/female relationships in Souljah  
 In class reading of "Theme for English B" by Hughes in (CP)  
**Writing Conferences**  
 Peer groups--Revisions  
**Reading Assignment-- "Living in two worlds" by Mabry**
- 4/18 7:00-10:00 Film: **Higher Learning**; Discussion of

**Freedom/Literacy, Reading Assignment--  
Autobiography of Malcolm X by Haley and  
X**

**Peer groups--Revisions  
Writing Conferences**

**4/25 7:00-10:00**

**Freedom & literacy in X  
In-class final written exam  
Exit interviews  
African Self Consciousness Scale  
Portfolios Due!  
Journals Collected**



12. Occupation\_\_\_\_\_; full time:\_\_\_\_\_; part time\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix D

LANGUAGE/ WRITING INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. What other American Englishes do you speak?

2. Do you consider the other language(s) you specified above to be something to be ashamed of? Yes \_\_\_\_\_;

No \_\_\_\_\_ .

If yes, which language? \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

When do you speak it? To whom?

3. Do you write in it?

4. List from (1) most important to (5) least important, characteristics of good writing:

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

(If more list on back)

5). Are you a good writer? Yes \_\_\_\_\_;  
No \_\_\_\_\_ (please explain your answer).

6). Do you think writing is important to your cultural group?

Why?

7). What kinds of writing do you like to do?

Why?

8). What is your favorite type of book to read?

Why?

9). Do you write on your own outside of school? Yes \_\_\_\_\_; No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, what kinds of writing and how often?

If no, why not?



10). What was the last thing you wrote for school?

Did you like doing this writing?

11). Do you like to share your writing with others?

Why or Why not?

12). What do you like about your writing?

13) What do you wish to improve about your writing?

## Appendix E

**THE AFRICAN SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS SCALE**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** The following statements reflect some beliefs, opinions and attitudes of Black people. Read each statement carefully and give your honest feelings about the beliefs and attitudes expressed. Indicate the extent to which you agree by using the following scale:

1-2  
Strongly  
Disagree

3-4  
Disagree

5-6  
Agree

7-8  
Strongly  
Agree

**CIRCLE** the number closest to your own feelings. Note that the higher the number you choose for the statement, the more you agree with that statement; and conversely, the lower the number you choose, the more you disagree with that statement. Also, there is no right or wrong answer, only the answer that best expresses your present feelings about the statement. **PLEASE RESPOND TO ALL STATEMENTS** (do not omit any).

- |     |  |                    |
|-----|--|--------------------|
| 1.  | I don't necessarily feel like I am also being mistreated in a situation where I see another Black person being mistreated.   | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 2.  | Black people should have their own independent schools which consider their African heritage and values an important part of the curriculum.   | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 3.  | Blacks who trust whites in general are basically very intelligent people.  | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 4.  | Blacks who are committed and prepared to uplift the (Black) race by any means necessary (including violence) are more intelligent than Blacks who are not this committed and prepared. | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 5.  | Blacks in America should try harder to be American rather than practicing activities that link them up with their African cultural heritage.   | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 6.  | Regardless of their interests, educational background and social achievements, I would prefer to associate with Black people than with nonBlacks.                                      | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 7.  | It is not such a good idea for black students to be required to learn an African language.   | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 8.  | It is not within the best interest of Blacks to depend on whites for anything, no matter how religious and decent they the (whites) purport to be.                                     | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 9.  | Blacks who place the highest value on Black life (over that of other people) are reverse racists and generally evil people.  | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 10. | Black children should be taught that they are African people at an early age.  | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |
| 11. | White people, generally speaking, are not opposed to self-   | 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 |

determination for Black people.

12. As a good index of self-respect, Blacks in America should consider adopting traditional African names for themselves. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
13. A white/European or Caucasian image of God and the "holy family" (among others considered close to God) are not such bad things for Blacks to worship. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
14. Blacks born in the United States are Black or African first, rather than American or just plain people. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
15. Black people who talk in a relatively loud manner, show a lot of emotions and feelings, and express themselves with a lot of movement and body motion are less intelligent than Blacks who do not behave this way. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
16. Racial consciousness and cultural awareness based on traditional African values are necessary to the development of Black traditional marriages and families that can contribute to the liberation and enhancement of Black people in America. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
17. In dealing with other Blacks, I consider myself quite different and unique from most of them. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
18. Blacks should form loving relationships with and marry only other Blacks. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
19. I have difficulty identifying with the culture of African people. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
20. It is intelligent for Blacks in America to organize to educate and liberate themselves from white-American domination. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
21. There is no such thing as African culture among Blacks in America. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
22. It is good for Black husbands and wives to help each other develop racial consciousness and cultural awareness in themselves and their children. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
23. Africa is not the ancestral homeland of all Black people throughout the world. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
24. It is good for Blacks in America to wear traditional African-type clothing and hair styles if they desire to do so. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
25. I feel little sense of commitment to Black people who are not close friends or relatives. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
26. All Black students in Africa and America should be expected to study African culture and history as it occurs throughout the world. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
27. Black children should be taught to love all races of people, even those races who do harm to them. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8

28. Blacks in America who view Africa as their homeland are more intelligent than those who view America as their homeland. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
29. If I saw Black children fighting, I would leave them to settle it alone. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
30. White people, generally speaking, do not respect Black life. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
31. Blacks in America should view Blacks from other countries (e.g. Ghana, Nigeria, and other countries in Africa) as foreigners rather than as their brothers and sisters. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
32. When a Black person uses the terms "Self, Me, and I" his/her reference should encompass all Black people rather than simply him/herself. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
33. Religion is dangerous for Black people when it directs and inspires them to become self-determining and independent of the white community. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
34. Black parents should encourage their children to respect all Black people, good and bad, and punish them when they don't show respect. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
35. Blacks who celebrate Kwanzaa and practice the "Nguzo Saba" (the Black Value System), both symbolizing African traditions, don't necessarily have better sense than Blacks who celebrate Easter, Christmas, and the Fourth of July. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
36. African culture is better for humanity than European culture. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
37. Black people's concern for self-knowledge (knowledge of one's history, philosophy, culture, etc) and self (collective)-determination makes them treat white people badly. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
38. The success of an individual Black person is not as important as the survival of all Black people. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
39. If a good /worthwhile education could be obtained at all schools (both Black and white), I would prefer for my child to attend a racially integrated school. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
40. It is good for Black people to refer to each other as brother and sister because such a practice is consistent with our African heritage. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
41. It is not necessary to require Black /African Studies courses in predominantly Black schools. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8
42. Being involved in wholesome group activities with other Blacks lifts my spirits more so than being involved in individual activities. 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8

**Appendix F**

**Writing Questionnaire**

1. Do you feel any differently about African American English?
2. Now that you've had some practice with AAVE and the written language of wider communication what do you see as the differences?
3. Was it harder or easier for you to write in AAVE?
4. Has your writing improved? Why or Why not?
5. Will you continue to develop your writing skills and write for yourself as well as the improvement of society? Please explain.

## **Appendix G**

### **Holistic Scoring Assessment Criteria**

#### **American Thought and Language Information for the Student**

**ATTENDANCE:** Regular and consistent class attendance is required in all ATL courses.

**GRADES:** The following principles generally apply in grading expository writing in ATL courses:

Although a 4.0 paper need not be of professional quality, it must be free from errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It is organized well, its purpose is clear, and its ideas are supported with pertinent details and brief but well-chosen quotations. It expresses independent thought with clarity, grace, and force.

A 3.5 paper is superior and contains few errors in mechanics, usage etc. It is generally well organized and coherently developed. It explains or illustrates key ideas. Displays facility in the use of language.

A 3.0 paper is also superior, but has certain shortcomings, such as routing errors, monotony in expression, ambiguity of purpose, or a lack of precision and economy in the use of words.

A 2.5 paper is acceptable as college level writing, but may reveal a pattern or accumulation of errors in mechanics, usage or sentence structure. Lacks organization or development and inadequately explains or illustrates ideas. May also demonstrate inappropriate use of language.

2.0 paper, though acceptable as college work, is routine in effect because of trite expression, inadequate support of generalizations, careless errors, or absence of a clear thesis.

A 1.5 paper barely passes as college level work. Writer attempts to express ideas, but they are undeveloped. Writing is fraught with mechanical errors and unsupported assumptions, poor word choice.

A grade of 1.0 means the work is below college standards. Often it exhibits an effort to deal with

ideas but is inadequate in expressing them. There may be monotonous sentences, imprecise use of words, rambling organization, repetition of ideas. Perhaps the writer failed to understand the assignment and thus missed the target. A paper that is otherwise good could receive this grade if the writer failed to adequately document his or her sources, so long as there isn't evidence of intentional plagiarism.

0.0 indicates the paper is markedly below college standards. The writer should consult the professor since prompt improvement needs to be made. This grade may also be assigned as a penalty grade for plagiarism.

**Appendix H**  
**Consent Form**

This course is designed to assess the effectiveness of an approach to teaching writing to African American students. Surveys and questionnaires will be given to students. Students may also be tape recorded. I am expected to meet for every class, on time. We must meet at least 3 hours per class. If I have an emergency, I will contact the researcher-teacher, before class time. I understand that all results will be treated with strict confidence and that I will remain anonymous in any report of research findings. Upon request, I may obtain results of the study. If any questions arise, I understand that I may contact Elaine Richardson (researcher) at 353-6801, or supervising professor, Dr. Geneva Smitherman at 353-9252. My grade for the course will not be effected if I choose not to participate in the study. I understand that my relationship with this university or any courses that I have taken or will take will not be jeopardized by my refusal to participate. I acknowledge that I have read and understand the terms above and agree to abide by them.

I give Elaine Richardson, researcher, permission to use my speech, writing samples, or any data collected in connection with English 290, "Race, Writing, & Culture: In the Vernacular!"

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Phone #'s \_\_\_\_\_ (h)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (w)

I refuse to be included in Elaine Richardson's study, but I want to participate in the class, English 290, "Race, Writing, & Culture: In the Vernacular!"

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



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