literacies

African American Literacies

Edited by Elaine Richardson

Foreword by Geneva Smitherman

African American Literacies

"Elaine Richardson's *African American Literacies* is a profoundly powerful and moving book. Though much has been written on Richardson's themes, her book is full of fresh ideas."

James Paul Gee, University of Wisconsin at Madison, USA

"Elaine Richardson has brought an energizing, critical Black voice into the conversation on African American literacy by grounding this book in African American ways of speaking and knowing. The daughter of an African American community where reading and writing failure often shortcircuited academic success, she is well equipped to confront attempted culture-cide in the writing classroom."

Arthur K. Spears, The City University of New York, USA

"Richardson has created an African American-centred composition curriculum that takes her students on the journey from 'slaveship to scholarship' … Ultimately, her book too will save somebody's life."

Geneva Smitherman, Michigan State University, USA

African American Literacies is a personal, public and political exploration of literacy education from the points of view of students from the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) culture.

Drawing on personal experience, Elaine Richardson provides a compelling account of the language and literacy practices of African American students. The book offers teachers new ways of thinking about and incorporating linguistic diversity into their theories and pedagogical methods of addressing students from AAVE cultures. Richardson builds on recent research to argue that teachers need not only to recognize the value and importance of African American culture, but also to use African American English when teaching AAVE speakers standard English.

African American Literacies offers a holistic and culturally relevant approach to literacy education, and is essential reading for anyone with an interest in the literacy practices of African American students.

Elaine Richardson is Assistant Professor of English and by courtesy Applied Linguistics at Pennsylvania State University.

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Literacy practices are changing rapidly in contemporary society in response to broad social, economic and technological changes: in education, the workplace, the media and in everyday life. The *Literacies* series has been developed to reflect the burgeoning research and scholarship in the field of literacy studies and its increasingly interdisciplinary nature. The series aims to situate reading and writing within its broader institutional contexts where literacy is considered as a social practice. Work in this field has been developed and drawn together to provide books which are accessible, interdisciplinary and international in scope, covering a wide range of social and institutional contexts.

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AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERACIES
Elaine Richardson

African American Literacies

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Contents

Figures and tables

Figures

Tables

Foreword

In essays and speeches contained in the collection, *The Education of Black People,* edited by Herbert Aptheker and published by the University of Massachusetts Press in 1973, W. E. B. DuBois laid out his grand vision for the education of Negroes (to use the terminology of that era). Focusing on higher education under US-style apartheid of the 1930s, DuBois argued that the role of education was not simply to teach Negroes how to make a living but how to make a life. He thus called for a curriculum and philosophical pedagogy grounded in their culture and real world needs.

In the same way, a Negro university in the United States of America begins with Negroes. It uses that variety of the English idiom which they understand; and above all, it is founded, or it should be founded on a knowledge of the history of their people in Africa and in the United States, and their present condition (DuBois, 1973: 93). College teachers cannot follow the medieval tradition of detached withdrawal from the world … The teacher … has got to be something far more than a master of a branch of human knowledge … the possibilities and advancement of [a Black man/woman] … in the world where [he/she] is to live and earn a living is of just as much importance in the teaching process as the content of the knowledge taught (DuBois, 1973: 78).

It is now more than seven decades since DuBois wrote these words. The US-style apartheid laws have been abolished. We have witnessed the emergence of a voluminous body of research on the language and culture of African Americans. Yet we find ourselves still engaged in struggle: how to implement pedagogical practices that will effectively and successfully address the continuing educational crises of Black students.

Elaine Richardson's work is a major contribution to that struggle. Her book brings together composition, African American language and the Black tradition of literacy. Seeking to do "right in a wrong world," Richardson has created an African American-centered composition curriculum that takes her students on the journey from "slaveship to scholarship." Along the way, they analyze literacy practices in Hip Hop and "discover" Black female literacies. For the first time, the students are exposed to a conception of the vernacular that goes far beyond phonemes, morphemes, and Black slang to encompass an Africanized worldview and what DuBois called the "wild sweet melodies" of African American

rhetorical and cultural practices. Richardson argues, and quite rightly so, that African American discourses and rhetorics constitute a "survival culture" that transforms Black people while simultaneously enriching and enlarging mainstream White American discourses. Thus, the vernacular is a crucial resource that often goes untapped as African American literacy failure rates continue to rise.

With clever, creative topic titles (my favorite: "Freestylin' or lookin' for a style that's free"), Richardson methodically builds her case for an African American-centered composition curriculum. At this late hour in the history of the African-centered Educational Movement, pedagogical justification for this kind of curriculum should not be necessary, with some schools boasting a successful track record coming up on three decades—e.g., New Concept Development Center, founded in Chicago in 1972, Aisha Shule/W. E. B. DuBois Preparatory Academy, founded in Detroit in 1974. Nonetheless, Richardson early on takes pains to explain that such a composition course is not separatist or intellectually deficient. Rather, it is what Richardson describes as the "course of study of subjects" such as "English language usage, literacy acquisition, rhetoric, writing, and education from the point of view of African American experiences." Displaying her own "heightened consciousness" of the rhetorical situation presented by a book on African American-centered composition, she presents critical interpretive readings and creative rhetorical analyses of early Black writers such as Phillis Wheatley and Lucy Terry; enslavement narratives, such as those of Harriet Jacobs and James Gronniosaw; Hip Hop artists; Black women rhetors. With stark clarity, we are reminded of the richness of "speakerly" texts and the Black Vernacular tradition, a reservoir of cultural productions more than sufficient to comprise the curriculum in a composition course.

Bringing together theory and practice in her ongoing literacy work with African American students in Big Ten university writing courses, Richardson offers quantitative and qualitative analyses of numerous student essays to demonstrate the effectiveness of an African American-centered composition curriculum. Varying levels of critical literacy development occurred throughout the classrooms where she conducted her "experiment." In one class, three of the students had their work accepted for publication. Not bad for a classroom of "basic" writers.

Notwithstanding the success of such a curriculum, the African American-centered approach is fraught with complexity and the potential for high drama. Richardson lays it all on the line, exposing the problems and instructional challenges, e.g., the issue of authority and credibility presented by a Black woman instructor ("me against the world"), student perceptions of such a course as "less than" and not a worthwhile intellectual endeavor, student resistance in the form of the "bi-racial" and the "objective" rhetorical stances. Nevertheless, she clings to the "bloodstained banner," unequivocally advocating African American-centered literacy experiences to help Black students struggling to "define themselves in a high tech, materialistic, capitalistic society." In fact, Richardson

concludes that the problems she has encountered in university and college classrooms excruciatingly demonstrate the need for African American-centered education all the way from Kindergarten through college. Word. Shonuff. Amen.

One of the most compelling aspects of Richardson's book is the interjection of her voice and personal herstory, in and outside of the Academy. We delight in reading about her Jamaican mother's ways of knowing and literacy practices that she has passed on to her daughter. We vicariously experience her Cleveland neighborhood, with its "number and reefah houses" and "stofront Churches galore." We suffer with her in her first experience in a college writing course where she wrote about that same neighborhood and its "nocturnal insects." We applaud her return to college several years and two babies later, as she struggles to stay afloat in a sea of redness in her "basic" writing class. We exult in her triumphant development of a strong sense of Intellectual Self in the face of societal and institutional messages to the contrary. Ultimately, her book too will save somebody's life.

Geneva Smitherman, PhD
University Distinguished Professor, Michigan State University
Author, *Talkin' that Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America* (2000)
March 2002

Acknowledgments

First giving honor to God for making me and giving me the parents and foreparents that I have. This book is dedicated to my momma and daddy, and to my beautiful daughters—Evelyn, Ebony, and Kaila. More love and good spirits. I want to thank my aunt, Hellen Vassel, who cleaned, cooked, washed, and prayed while I wrote the first draft of this manuscript. More fire! I have to thank my daughters again for being my best friends and understanding when momma ain't got time. Thanks also to my niece, Christina, and her father, my brother, Chris. Remember, the world is yours. I would like to thank all of the students with whom I have had the pleasure of working over the years. Don't forget to come back and see me before I get old. Power to the people! Thanks to all of my mentors who helped me with problems and for giving me much needed feedback: Keith Gilyard, Jim Gee, Bernard Bell, Jack Selzer, Cheryl Glenn, John Rickford, John Baugh. Thanks to the reviewers who made this book possible: Angela Rickford, Arthur Spears, and Jim Gee. Thanks to other colleagues in the profession for their work and guidance: Ted Lardner, Tom Fox, Walt Wolfram, Sonja Lanehart, Denise Troutman, Marcy Morgan, Arnetha Ball, Charles Debose, Walter Edwards, H. Samy Alim, Jackie Royster, Shirley Wilson Logan, Gwen Pough, Signithia Fordham, Rashidah Muhammad, Vorris Nunley, the entire NCTE Black Caucus for hush harbor rhetoric. My church—Unity Church of Jesus Christ—for support and for understanding when I'm not able to attend services. Much love to all my colleagues and friends at the University of Minnesota especially Ezra Hyland, Terry Collins, Geoff Sirc, Lisa Albrecht, and all the supporters of The Real Deal on Ebonics Conference, especially Mahmoud El Kati. Most highest big up to my mentor, Geneva da Diva Smitherman. Thanks for helping me to stand on your shoulders. And finally, thanks to two of the best research assistants a sista could have. Thank you Aesha Adams, my sister, daughter, niece, cousin, friend! And, thank you to Adam "da bomb" Banks for your serious critiques and stimulating conversations. I couldn't have done this without you. Many thanks to Christy Kirkpatrick, Louisa Semlyn, and David Barton. Early aspects of this work were supported by grants from the University of Minnesota, Minnesota Humanities Commission, the Pennsylvania State University Minority Faculty Development Fund. Later stages of this work were

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Introduction: don't we still have to prove our humanity?

The first time this prof humiliated me was when I used “nocturnal insects” in my paper on my neighborhood to describe my roaches. I had heard the word nocturnal and I thought I’d use it in my paper. My neighborhood was exciting to me, and I wrote about it. I thought he wanted us to tell the truth, from our own perspectives, and make it interesting. My neighborhood flourished in trade and industry with “the number house,” “the reefah house,” “the after hour joint,” and other houses of ill repute. We also had churches galore. Lots of them right next door to each other—“sto fronts,” we called them. Men and women went in and out of those houses 24/7/365. I couldn’t wait until I got old enough to go into those joints, too. (That’s another book though.) They shot dice on the side of the number house. Smoked reefah on the side of the reefah house. My Pal, the proprietor of the after hour joint, didn’t let people hang around outside of his joint due to police heat. At about age 13, I could talk and shoot some mean dice. “Bet you don’t barg.” “Baby need a new pair a shoes.” “7/11 is heaven.” I thought he would like it, my English teacher. I laid it all out there. I remember talking about the kind of clothes people wore and being really descriptive. Okay, I didn’t know how to use punctuation correctly, but was that any reason to give me a “D?”

We were from the same kind of place, Mike and me, and we were the only two Black people in the class. The assignment was to write about our neighborhoods and how they influenced us. Mike never let me read his paper, but he tripped the prof out, too. Mike was using stuff from *Manchild in the Promised Land* as his model. Neither Mike nor I liked how the prof would change the meaning of what we were writing about when he made us rearrange it and change our words. He did tell me that I was using dialectal variants. But that was the extent of any explicit instruction in negotiating different discourses and ideologies. When I went to his office for help, our twenty-minute sessions seemed to take a great toll on him. He seemed overwhelmed by the number of grammatical sins I had committed. Perhaps he pitied me, wondering why I was even attending the university. He did ask me what high school I attended. When I told him, he shook his head and directed me to further work in the writing center.

In my visits to the writing center, one teaching assistant would deal with my paper for a while, but she would soon grow tired of asking me what I was

trying to say. Quite frankly, I thought what I had written was plain and simple. When she would confer with her colleagues, I wondered: "Why don't they understand? They suppose to be smart." They were employed as college writing tutors, after all. It wasn't long before I figured out that I could succeed by relinquishing my language variety and my history, experience, culture, and perspective for theirs. All I had to do was let them Whitenize my papers. Though the images and reality of what I wanted to express were diminished on the page, their language could speak for me and "earn" me a grade of "C." And at that point in time, that was all I wanted. Ah, the price for a "C" was high, the subordination of my experience and the erasure of my voice paralleling the absence of Black voices and culturally relevant material and instruction in the curriculum and the classroom. There were instances when we read "I Have a Dream" by Dr King or "The Student as Nigger" by Jerry Farber. However, when we read "I Have a Dream," for example, no Afrocentric analysis was offered as a possible reading; no mention of the Black style in Dr King's speech. Unquestionably, Dr King's speeches and writings epitomize the Afro-Americanized rhetorical and literacy traditions. As for "the student as Nigger" both Mike and I were shocked that the professor offered this text unproblematically, as though we would accept that the average college student (who by the way is the White) has an experience that parallels the African American experience of dehumanizing slavery, rape, lynching, linguistic and cultural oppression, and continued structural inequality in the aftermath of legal segregation. He didn't and couldn't provide a context for which we could interpret that text and realistically identify with it. I'm not advocating that every course be about race, but if a professor chooses to include a piece of writing with the word "nigger" in it and then glosses over the significance of that concept in the lives and historical memory of African Americans, how could he lead us to a decent rhetorical analysis of the piece? On what grounds could we explore the ethos of the piece? The logos? Did he expect that Mike and I would just be joyful because the author chose to use a word that signaled some connection to the Black struggle? Any real discussions about the concept of race or racism were avoided. This is what I call the devoicing and disempowerment of African American students. The opportunity to see oneself in the curriculum is not encouraged in that type of composition classroom. Students want to learn standardized American English conventions, and to become skilled rhetors, but these are often presented as neutral practices, isolated from the history of power relations and the politics of literacy. Consequently, most African American Vernacular English speaking students become further indoctrinated in the precepts of White dominant discourse in the process. What the student brings to the classroom is not valued or recognized; no transcultural dialogism takes place. This is not to say that there are not educators dedicated to exploring these issues with their students, but far too often cultural conflict is decentralized even as it is significant in cross cultural written and oral communication.

After one of the regular trips to the prof's office for a one-on-one conference, Mike always said stuff like, "He got the power in here, but I'll kick his punk ass outside." That prof had a way of crossing all the life out of our papers with his red pen. I dreaded that. Of course, now I know that standardized American English is not the possession of any one group and can be used by any citizen as a tool of empowerment. It was not presented to me as something that strong conscious Black people could help to shape. I didn't see it as a tool of empowerment and nobody was showing me how I could make it my own. I wanted to know why the White kids that we sat next to (the niggers in Farber's words) didn't have the same kind of grades we had, Mike and me. Before I found out, I had some living to do. (That's the other book I mentioned.)

Now I was back and desperate to stay in school. I had two babies, and I was on welfare. I never liked the stigma attached to welfare, so my goal was to go to school, try the American way, and get a "good job." Maybe teach school or something—I didn't know for sure. I just felt that I was smart, and never really found out I was illiterate until I went to college and got placed into dummy English. And, yes, everybody knew it as dummy English. I didn't care. I just wanted to get a degree and a job. I was working in the school library on work-study, at the reserve desk. I had been in all the houses in my neighborhood now and came back to school for refuge. Dr P came into the library to put some books on reserve for his class when he bumped into me. I didn't remember him. He said, "I know you." I thought, "damn, I came to school to get away and this guy knows me." I wanted to keep looking away, but this man got in my face and kept going on and on about his knowing me from somewhere. He went away only to return a few weeks later saying, "You're the A/F girl, the one who sat directly in front and slept in my physics class. Where've you been?" I could say, but I wouldn't. That had been five years ago. I just put on my smile and vaguely remembered being in his class. I remembered almost flunking it, getting Fs on most all the quizzes and the midterm. He called me "the A/F girl" because I'd come to his class hungover and I'd sleep, but somehow I decided to learn the stuff. I got an A on the final so he gave me a C for the class. A plus F = C.

But now I was back, not just wanting Cs. I wanted to do school just as I had done the streets. Done it to death. I remembered that Dr P told me that he was glad that I had come back to school and that if I ever needed help, he would help me. He said they needed more bright Black students in Physics. He gave me his phone number and all. And once after a splash in the sea of redness, I decided to call him and see if he could help me with my papers.

Dr P looked at my paper and said, "you don't talk like this. Write like you talk." I was trying not to write like I really talked because I knew that would be rejected. The way I spoke with him was the speech reserved for strangers and White folks. I knew about style shifting from my home and the streets. When dealing with White folks you talked like them. But I didn't know how to translate that to the page. My problem was that I didn't know how to write standardized English and I didn't know punctuation. Anyway, Dr P helped me

with punctuation and organization. My tutor, a young African American woman, A, helped me, too. She worked for the developmental program, "Special Studies."

When I turned my paper in to this new prof, he asked me "Did you write this paper?" That was almost the last time I got humiliated about my writing. Well, that's an overstatement. Anyway, my tutor was so mad when I told her what he said. She said "Elaine you can't let him talk to you like that. He thinks you can't think. Ain't nothing wrong with your mind. You're smart. I'm gonna go over there and tell him something. Who does he think he is?" And she did. One day after class, A was there waiting in the hall. She beckoned for the prof to come over to her and they exchanged words. She felt it was her duty to protect my voice. I didn't hear their conversation. When they were done, she came over to me loudtalking saying, "You have good ideas and a nice way of expressing them. Don't let them kill your voice." I was on my way to figuring out one reason that the White kids that we sat next to didn't get the same grades as people like Mike and me. That problem is *waaaaay* bigger than us. I spent the rest of my undergraduate years becoming an English major, trying to find out the deal on Black folks, language, literacy, and schooling. On my journey, I met Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin*. In a sense, that book saved my life. It was the first time that I read or even heard somewhere that what Black people spoke was a treasure, that it had a history behind it—not just any old history either. I found out that African American language has rules. That African American language is a part of African American history, a part of African American cultural and intellectual heritage. I always thought deep inside that I was smart, or at the least, not dumb, and Smitherman's book confirmed it for me.

In Chapter 1, "Literacy, language, composition, rhetoric and (not) the African American student," I discuss social practices such as societal stratification and the ideologies that undergird the decades' long literacy underachievement of African American students. I also discuss how African American literacy has been worked with and around in the field of rhetoric and composition, evaluating new thinking there that led me to the exploration of African American-centered rhetorics and literacies. In Chapter 2, "The literacies of African American-centered rhetoric and composition: freestylin' or lookin' for a style that's free," I map the evolution of the Black Voice in America. Here, African American Vernacular English is presented as a part of the culture of African American survival and development from slave ship to scholarship. The complexity of this topic is explored from the view of rhetorical analyses of African American literature, folklore, and other vernacular expressive arts. Chapter 3, "'To protect and serve': African American female literacies," continues to explore the literacies that inform an African American-centered rhetoric, with a focus on the female contribution to African American literacies. In Chapter 4, "African American-centered rhetoric, composition, and literacy: theory and research," I report on a much more detailed study discussing theoretical influences and

moving on to analysis and interpretation of data. The central research question that my study sought to answer concerns the ability of African American methodology to enhance the literacy of African American students. In Chapter 5, "Composition in a fifth key: rhetorics and discourses in an African American-centered writing classroom," I discuss the actual curriculum that I taught and the thinking behind the curriculum, while Chapter 6, "Dukin' it out with 'the powers that be': centering African American-centered studies and students in the traditional curriculum," outlines the problems one can expect to incur when implementing such a course in predominantly traditional institutions. I hope this book helps someone the way Geneva Smitherman's book helped me.

1
Literacy, language, composition, rhetoric and (not) the African American student: sick and tired of being sick and tired

I was sitting here with a bad case of writer's block wondering how to arrange my arguments in the most persuasive manner. Hoping not to lose you, my K-12 language arts teachers, or you, my composition and rhetoric colleagues, or you, my fellow sociolinguists, or you, my new literacy studies family. And I sure couldn't stand to lose my African American generalists or anyone who is sick and tired of being sick and tired of the decades long struggle to stamp out our failure in the literacy education of African American students.

At first I started out with a chart that I replicated from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which detailed the disparate writing achievement of Black, Hispanic, White, and Asian students from fourth grade through twelfth grade. I decided to background that[1] when I, while rambling through a bookstore bag, saw this bookmark (see Figure 1.1). And that just got me burning. "He is in the eighth grade but he's reading at the fourth grade level. Will you change this?" The young Black male body is foregrounded in the picture of the bookmark—he symbolizes illiteracy—in need of only a helping hand. The target audience for the ad is recent college graduates. We realize that the founder of the organization intends to make a difference with her life and encourage others to do the same by encouraging young graduates to dedicate their time to a worthy cause. And to be fair, a small percentage of children might improve with the extra help, but we also know that this program cannot significantly stem the tide of literacy underachievement.

Recent college graduates are offered loan forgiveness in addition to salaries if they commit to teach in the public schools in urban and rural communities for two years, as if fresh graduates could actually change something rotten that's been going on for decades. We do the same thing at the university level by initiating teaching assistants into the freshman composition classroom and bidding them to learn on the job. The bookmark exhorts young graduates to "Teach for America." That's basically what we all are doing—Teaching for America. I want my student loans forgiven too!

For the most part, America continues to teach us to accept the status of lower achievement for Black students as the norm. Under the present system, we are set in motion to replicate the paradigm and the results. The old folks used to say,