CRITIQUE ON
THE PROBLEMATIC OF
IMPLEMENTING AFROCENTRICITY
INTO TRADITIONAL CURRICULUM
“The Powers That Be”

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This article is a subjective reflection on the implementation of 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. Students’ ideas of “making it” in academia influence the academic personas they adopt or have been trained to adopt. The diversity within the African American community brings with it the clash of diverse ideologies and class intersections. For the most part, all African Americans come from private and public schools with 400-plus years of stereotypes hanging over their heads. Most did not escape the experience of miseducation. For as many African Americans who come to college “prepared,” an equal or greater number arrive not prepared for college-level work. This idea of preparedness is in and of itself telling. Most come prepared to experience another 4 or more years of miseducation. Miseducation here is employed in the sense in which Woodson (1933/1990) so thoroughly explained—a form of training designed for the uplifting of the dominant society that inadvertently works to the demise of the oppressed people in the society.
Another way of stating the difficulty with introducing students to the intellectual validity of African ways of thought is that they have been indoctrinated into the precepts of European American-centered ways of knowing, which at its base is positivistic. Add to this the fact that anything African American 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 referred to in this article was conceived as a step toward reversing the basis of African American students’ literacy lag. The written literacy acquisition of students from the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) culture is not on par with that of students from the dominant culture (Applebee, 1986, 1990; Chapman-Thompson, 1994). AAVE students are still placed disproportionately in college-level remedial writing courses (Rose, 1989). 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, 1995). Although the first National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) writing study showed that African American students had improved twice as much as their White counterparts, African American students’ scores were still not on par with those of White students as reported in the most recent NAEP report (Smitherman, 1994).

Although many factors contribute to the (African American student) literacy lag (Boykin, 1986; Engs, 1987; Epps, 1985; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Labov, 1972; Ogbu & Simons, 1994), the cultural gap is one that may be more easily dealt with. The cultural gap has
been well documented in the English composition classroom (Campbell, 1993; Fox, 1990; Heath, 1993; Moss & Walters, 1993; Shaughnessy, 1977). An African-centered pedagogy is needed in composition to make students aware of the talents they already have and to maintain and build on the culture that nurtured them. In this regard, all African American students who have lived in America for any length of time are members of the AAVE culture because of the collective and individual identity negotiation involved in the Black experience.

The African-centered composition curriculum is based in five theoretical traditions.

Asante’s (1990) theory of Afrocentricity is the basis of the curriculum. Afrocentricity is an inclusive approach to phenomena that 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 his or her experience. From this perspective, African American students’ literacy education should involve their experiences and be experienced by them.

Literacy acquisition is not a set of skills to be mastered. It is 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. Students of African descent should not be dislocated so that they have to reinvent themselves to negotiate new information. Rather, students develop from their own cultural position, so that new information can be effectively organized. Asante (1991) states, “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” (p. 134). Once AAVE culture is recognized as a part of the African worldview and the self, it can be analyzed and appropriately incorporated into the wider repertoire of instructional stimuli.

Giroux’s (1991) suggestion that best practices in literacy instruction acknowledge literacy’s political context, as well as our students’ need to locate themselves in the contested site of literacy as it is
practiced in the United States, complements the African-centered approach. Giroux 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. (p. xv)

The African-centered approach to writing instruction emphasizes the pursuit of literacy as more than a positivistic academic exercise. Students' own culture and literacy experiences are recognized as valuable tools that inform ways in which they explore and help shape society. Giroux's (1991) 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, he or 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 texts created by Africans in this country (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 (1990) concept of "position" is the third theoretical influence in the 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. (Fox, 1991, p. 292)

This aspect of the African-centered approach coincides with the thinking of progressive language arts and literacy educators such as Stock (1995) and Freire and Macedo (1993). 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 viewpoint that students are positioned and that they come from somewhere with something. This "something" that students bring with them is valuable and fundamental to the educational process. Students are not blank slates waiting to be written on. 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. The African-centered approach strives to achieve this by connecting AAVE students to the Black literacy tradition and stimulating their critical awareness.

Gates's (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 that 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, redefining their own reality. In Gates's 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. (p. 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 uniquely repeated in many African American texts.

An African-centered approach emphasizes the relationship between AAVE cultural identity and its interaction with the reading and writing of texts. Gates (1988) sheds light on the fact that literacy as freedom and signifying lie at the heart of the African American experience. Freedom through literacy introduces 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 is to have students locate themselves within this tradition and, to echo the sentiments of Asante (1990), "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 or variety of nonnative speakers (in this case, AAVE) to teach the target language (in this case, the written language of wider communication [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 the present approach is geared more toward the discourse/rhetorical levels, the same principles apply. The African-centered approach aims to 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 works, such as Smitherman’s (1977/1986) seminal work on Black language and culture, and Mitchell-Kernan’s (1974) eloquent discussion and examples of one of AAVE’s signature features, indirection and signification, students are invited to explore AAVE as an ideological stance and as a way of being in the world.

The African-centered curriculum consisted of various exercises designed to sensitize students to the conflicting and complementary aspects of AAVE culture and the dominant or LWC culture. Both cultures are studied from the stance that language reflects worldview: self, history, ideology, and culture.

The curriculum was implemented in spring 1996 at a major midwestern university. The class consisted of 24 African American students: 8 freshmen, 14 sophomores, 1 junior, and 1 senior. As they delved in, the curriculum took on a life of its own. I could not anticipate the restlessness that it 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 consciousness that their behaviors sometimes reflected this sad truth.

The curriculum was based on 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 this premise: “Black anything is nothing” is pivotal to a critical understanding of the students’ interaction with the curriculum. 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 12 or more years of miseducation.

The curriculum began with getting the students to think about and interact with the enslavement narratives: Gronniosaw (1774), Equiano (1987), Douglass (1987), and “A Slave Girl’s Story” (Drumgoold, 1898). 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 of 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 explained by Gates (1988), 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, p. 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, rac-
ism, oppression, religion, struggle for self-determination, and so on. Our discussions of the texts centered on connecting these themes to contemporary Black life. Some students were not aware of the problematics within these themes, but 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 (1987), describing 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:

Our 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. (p. 20)

On 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 on 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 2 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 throwen 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’s narrative to be the most accessible text. Some complained that “A Slave Girl’s Story” (Drumgoold, 1898) 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 (1898) 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 literate 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 Drumgoold's text 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 narrative, students were prepared for the first essay assignment by viewing and discussing excerpts from *Roots*, an in-class writing activity, a discussion of themes of the Black experience as presented in the texts, mini-lectures on the Black literacy quest, and a discussion of a Smitherman handout on AAVE and the Black experience. The first academic essay question was the following: In what ways is your experience as an African American similar to any you’ve read about thus far?
We discussed the academic essay as a special kind of writing, with a special form expected of all students in the academy. For the academic essay, students were to do the following:

Discuss the lives of any of the enslaved Africans: Gronniosaw, Equiano, Drumgoold, Kizzy, Kinte 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, African #9, wrote a very superficial paper about how she could not 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 reread Douglass (1987), who discussed the creation of classism and the development of the mulatto class in the enslaved African communities and his own suspected biraciality. Furthermore, there was discussion of Black-White relations in Gronniosaw (1774/1987). After subsequent discussions on the matter and rereading of the texts, the student managed to write a paper directly addressing the topic.

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 experiences of Blacks. In other words, she said she had no knowledge or experiences of oppression or institutional racism. On learning of this, I read Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” 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 teaches her 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 of “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 a language/writing questionnaire that all of the students answered, most of the characteristics that 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 batch of essays that I got back from students ranged from beginning to scratch the surface in the direction of critical thinking and writing to students who had no trouble and only needed to be given the opportunity to blossom. Some students complained that the students who wrote "racist stuff about White folks" were the ones who got the best grades on their papers. In fact, two students commented in an exit questionnaire that they thought their writing was not appreciated by me because I made them "revise, revise again, and rerevise" 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 "The Chain Remain the Same" (in press) and "Forms of Things Unknown" and Mitchell-Kernan's (1974) Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community 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 "The Chain Remain the Same" by Smitherman, students brought in contemporary raps and explained facets 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 could not explain phonological aspects, only value-centered devices or struc-
tural devices—signifying, "flippin' the script," braggadocio, tonal semantics, narrative sequencing, and "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 our own oppression when we become desensitized to our plight as the struggle to overcome "the powers that be." I believe that 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. The ability to think and use language is what makes us uniquely human. Our level of human development is contingent on 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 (1974) piece. We read portions of Mitchell-Kernan and Smither-
man’s “Forms” in class because they proved hard reading for the students. Their assignment for this section of the curriculum consisted of students bringing in an article that addressed a topic of utmost concern to the AAVE community. They were to write a piece that 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 a list of Black discourse features (i.e., “direct address,” “ethnolinguistic idioms,” etc.) from Smitherman (1994). 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.

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. Furthermore, 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. Three students had pieces accepted for publication, all in Black outlets.

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 on deeper reflection, I still believe in this kind of exercise because it emphasizes the kind of language use that is in conflict with the academic style.

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 did not 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 benefited from the experience. 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 economic, social, cultural, and political uplift of all African people. Furthermore, 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. I sensed a lostness in some of the students’ faces, not academic lostness, but purposelessness—no sense of direction. This points to the problem of retaining Black students in institutions of higher learning. I think Baldwin’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 are struggling to achieve freedom through literacy despite insurmountable odds.

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.”

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