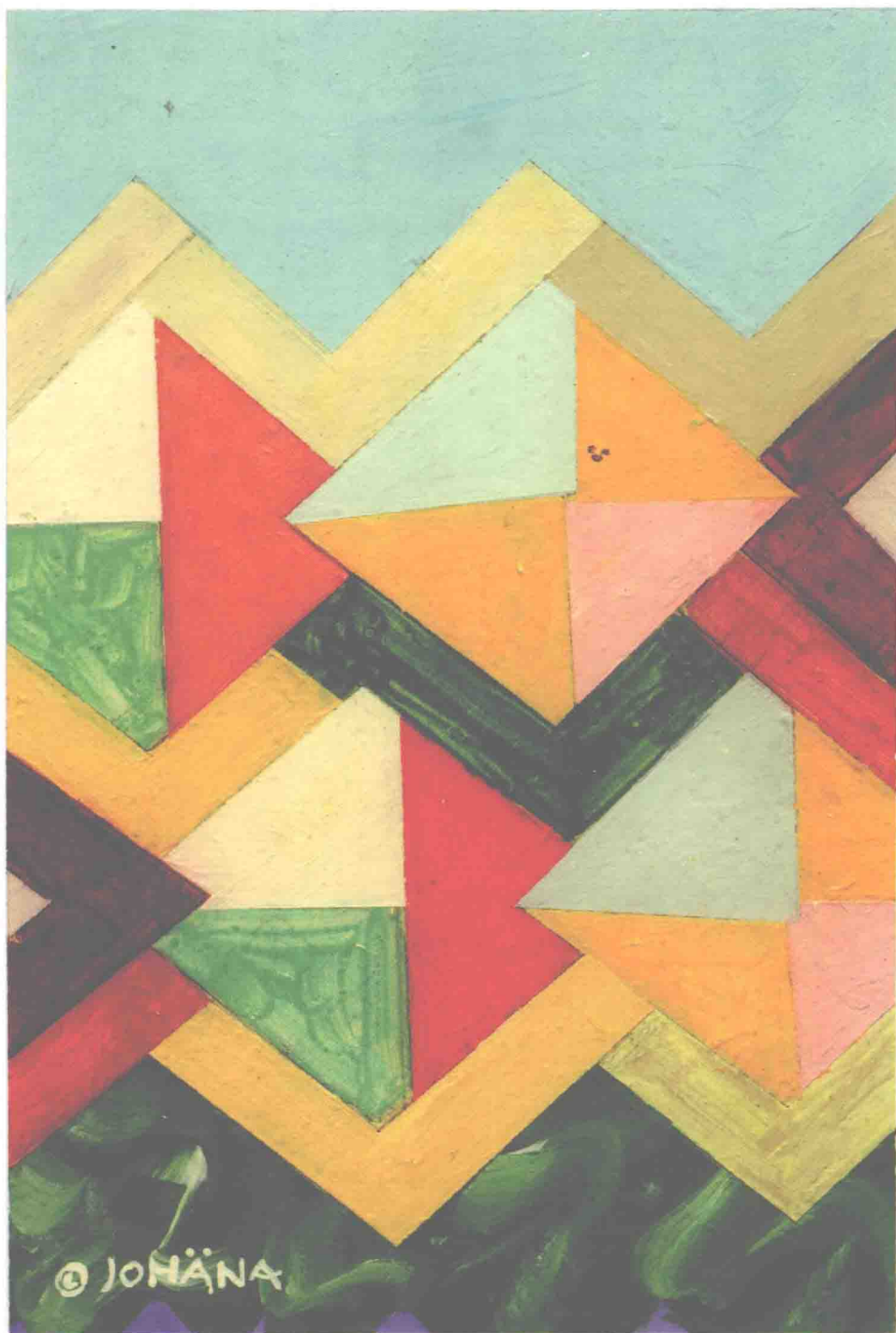


# Afrocentric Teacher-Research

Rethinking Appropriateness and Inclusion



Staci M. Perryman-Clark

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Rethinking Appropriateness and Inclusion



PETER LANG

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## Advance praise for **Afrocentric Teacher-Research**

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"This is an audacious book! As a discipline, we've been arguing for years that pedagogical approaches rooted in dominant Western cultural paradigms are the most appropriate way to teach first-year writing because this 'common culture' approach is good for all students. In this book, Staci M. Perryman-Clark flips that script and, in doing so, pushes our notions about what might constitute a common approach into a fresh new space by putting an Afrocentric worldview at the center of a writing curriculum that teaches students to value *all* languages and language practices. She doesn't do this by creating an 'us versus them' curriculum. Instead, she teaches us what kind of learning is really possible in a classroom where the cultural assumptions of the curriculum are visibly marked and part of the ongoing discussion about all writing practices. Moreover, she doesn't just show us how we can make Afrocentric pedagogy relevant in our writing courses, she models how we can ethically engage in *all* models of culturally-centered pedagogy—including Western culture—by thinking hard about issues of appropriateness and inclusion in a way that reconceptualizes both concepts, keeping the living, breathing students in our classrooms firmly at the center of our practices. Her careful, local approach to such a critical topic has broad implications for all teachers of writing and all administrators of writing programs. This is important, forward-thinking scholarship that all teachers, administrators and graduate teachers should take seriously."

—MALEA POWELL, 2012 CHAIR, CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION & COMMUNICATION;  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF WRITING, RHETORIC & AMERICAN CULTURES, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

"*Afrocentric Teacher-Research: Rethinking Appropriateness and Inclusion* is an innovative, intellectually bold work by one of the most talented and brightest thinkers in the emerging generation of scholars in composition and rhetoric. This ground-breaking work positions Staci M. Perryman-Clark for a national leadership role in the field. She has not only responded to the field's long-standing call for a pedagogical paradigm grounded in language rights and cultural diversity for the classroom—and society—she has simultaneously provided us with a brilliantly crafted curriculum model with a proven record of success. Props to Perryman-Clark for steppin' to the challenge. This pioneering work creatively re-mixes Afrocentric theory and Ebonics-based sociolinguistics for instruction in the writing classroom. Let the doubting Thomases be forever silenced.

As a member of the 1972 Committee on CCCC Language Statement, which produced the 'Students' Right to Their Own Language,' and for over two decades, as chair of the CCCC Language Policy Committee, which crafted CCCC's National Language Policy, advocating multilingualism for all students, I, along with countless other language scholars, have hungered for a book like this, that would blend theory and practice, that would show and prove the implementation of our decades-old vision of composition and language instruction for all students. Dr. Perryman-Clark is the one we have been waiting for. Others are sure to follow."

—GENEVA SMITHERMAN, UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR EMERITA OF ENGLISH,  
CO-FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBER, AFRICAN AMERICAN AND AFRICAN STUDIES,  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

"Carefully and thoughtfully, Staci M. Perryman-Clark suggests ways to implement an Afrocentric writing curriculum for all students providing readings, assignments, strategies, and ideas that guide writing instructors and administrators to work within institutional and non-separatist parameters."

—ELAINE B. RICHARDSON, PROFESSOR OF LITERACY STUDIES, THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

# **Afrocentric Teacher-Research**

# Studies in Composition and Rhetoric

Leonard Podis  
*General Editor*

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## Foreword

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Dr. Staci Perryman-Clark, a writing teacher and writing program administrator, has created an Ebonics-based Afrocentric Teacher-Research curriculum. By focusing this curriculum on all students (rather than only Black students), she thereby rethinks appropriateness and inclusion. This is no small feat. It matters that Dr. Perryman-Clark is a Black woman, racially and sexually marked, identifying herself as an Afrocentric writing instructor and writing program administrator (WPA). She is also an assistant professor. Needless to say, Perryman-Clark's intersectional position is not easily navigated nor associated with power or privilege. Yet, she bravely responds to the call of the Students' Right to Their Own Language, a language policy of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, which urges writing instructors to implement pedagogies that reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of our world. Though the policy is more than 30 years old, it has not been taken up on a large-scale, with many instructors not feeling equipped to implement the policy and many more feeling powerless to effect change in their locations. Seeking to help all students master programmatic goals such as developing research, analytic and argumentation skills, she steps outside the box and offers to them Afrocentricity as a worldview. She strives to put Afrocentric thought and all students at the center of inquiry—a mammoth task. But one that she feels compelled to tackle in order to implement Afrocentricity for socially just and liberating literacy education.

She rethinks appropriateness and inclusion in more ways than one. She teaches students to respect Ebonics. All languages and their speakers deserve respect. And all students have a right to know about languages that have enriched our society. Students should understand something about the history, the challenges of democratic education, research and teaching. Why not Ebonics? By implementing an Ebonics curriculum in first year writing, Perryman-Clark is suggesting change for writing programs in general. And why not? Linguistic diversity, bidialectalism, codeswitching, ESL, multilingualism, linguistic pluralism, language attitudes, language rights, the exploration of language, culture, and society are at the heart of an Afrocentric writing curriculum, at least they are in Perryman-Clark's. In this classroom, some write in Ebonics, but all write about Ebonics and Perryman-Clark has created strategic assignments and assessments that value the diverse writing her curriculum produces. Her assignments meet both programmatic and visionary goals. As discussed by Adler-Kassner (2008), Perryman-Clark's work, as a writing program administrator, provides an alternative framework that can be built upon:

[W]orking at the local level, we can develop assessment strategies within our own programs that reflect what we value, that ask questions and implement procedures that reflect what we know about best practices within our own courses and discipline. We can then use these assessments as bases for conversations beyond our programs—with

our department chairs, our provosts, our university press officers, assessment coordinators, and presidents. Working bottom-up from our programs and top-down with our administrators, we can hope to provide alternative frames for these conversations that reflect our values and interests. (p. 184)

Carefully and thoughtfully, Perryman-Clark suggests ways to implement an Afrocentric writing curriculum for all students providing readings, assignments, strategies, and ideas that guide writing instructors and administrators to work within institutional and non-separatist parameters. Perryman-Clark argues that in order to effect change in our profession and in society, writing programs must include Ebonics and all language varieties that represent students' identities as central to "writing programmatic mission statements, outcomes, and learning objectives."

Of course, Perryman-Clark's approach is not a one-size fits all. Readers may not agree with her every word. But one thing is for sure, she offers a way forward for socially just literacy education. Her curriculum talks and testifies to the fact that new research-informed pedagogies for all of today's students can be envisioned and successfully implemented. Read her closely and be inspired!

Elaine Richardson, Ph.D.

Professor of Literacy Studies, The Ohio State University

Author of the educational memoir, *Po Ho on Dope (PHD) to PhD: How Education Saved My Life* (forthcoming, February 2013)



# Acknowledgments

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I first give praise, honor, and glory to the One who created me, and the One who made it possible for me to write this book. I want to take the opportunity to thank my life partner and devoted husband, Randall, and my curious daughter Jamison, for their patience and love. My family—Rev, Mommy, and Tracee also each lent their support and have been with me every step of the way. I would also like to acknowledge the reviewers at Peter Lang, and especially Leonard Podis, editor of Peter Lang's Series in Composition and Rhetoric, for providing valuable and supportive feedback in the preparation of this manuscript. Special thanks also goes out to Emily J. Stinson and Kim Ballard for their support in the production process for this project. Finally, I would like to thank Jeff Grabill, Geneva Smitherman ("Dr. G"), Elaine Richardson ("Auntie E"), Malea Powell, Gwendolyn Pough, Jonathan Bush, Charlotte Thralls, Brian Gogan, Lisa Cohen Minnick, Angela Haas, David E. Kirkland, Collin Craig, the NCTE/CCCC Black Caucus, and a host of professional colleagues and friends, near and far who listened to my ideas, provided professional advice, and offered words of encouragement and support for me throughout the composing process. Last but not least, I thank my fall 2008 WRA 125 students from Michigan State University who have taught me more than anyone what it means to be an Afrocentric teacher-researcher.

## Acknowledgments of Publications Referenced in This Book

Perryman-Clark, Staci M. "Toward a Pedagogy of Linguistic Diversity: Understanding Ebonics Linguistic Practices and Programmatic Learning Goals." *Teaching English in a Two Year College* 39.3 (2012): 230-246. Print. Copyright 2012 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

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# Introduction

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## Understanding Appropriateness and Conclusion

### A Push Toward Relevance

As I write the introduction to this book, I'm bombarded with media representations suggesting that African American cultural traditions are uncivilized, unprofessional, and unacceptable in today's workforce and society. I read the outraged comments on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook about a controversial advertisement by skin care company Nivea in *Esquire* magazine. CNN's *Marquee Blog* describes this advertisement as follows:

The advert for Nivea for Men appeared in the September issue of *Esquire* magazine [sic] and featured a clean-cut, African-American male holding what appeared to be a mask of a black man with an Afro hair style and a beard. The copy accompanying the ad read, "Look Like You Give a Damn. Re-civilize Yourself." (CNN.com)

Immediately, citizens wage a public campaign calling for Nivea to remove the advertisement due to its racially insensitive message. After this news story broke, I read through comments that claimed that African Americans were overreacting to the ad. One commenter wrote, "Totally not racist. It is a black man holding a bushy head. It has nothing to do with the color of his skin, just that he didn't groom well before Nivea. Would work the same for black, white, red, yellow, etc. Anyone who thinks this is racist is nutso" (facebook.com). Such statements seem to fit the definition of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) terms "color-blind racism," a racism that blames the victim in "a very indirect 'now you see it, now you don't' style that matches the character of the new racism" (p. 25). Despite my outrage at reading some of the comments on the Nivea ad, I decided not to post my own comment because I have become tired of defending the notion that, even with the election of our nation's first African American president, we certainly do not live in a postracial society.

The day after Nivea issued an apology to readers of *Esquire*, I learned that Central Catholic High School (CCHS), a parochial high school in my hometown wanted to ban from its dress code dreadlocks, African American "twisty" braids, mohawks, and spiked hairdos. To be fair, the dress code doesn't single out African American hairstyles exclusively, but one certainly could argue that such dress code requirements are insensitive to African American culture. After one Facebook user commented, "[Outcry] is wrong, it isn't just the minorities this is targeting, it mentions numerous other hairstyles, but nice to see once again that someone is trying to make a non-racial issue into something that is . . ." I decided to speak out on the issue. I initially wrote:

No one is suggesting that styles worn often by African Americans are the only styles unfairly targeted by CCHS. The larger issue, however, is why certain styles—including dreads and twists—are those deemed as inappropriate. Why are such styles considered unacceptable for CCHS's dress? Responses to this question often reflect racist, classist, and sexist rhetoric. (Facebook.com)

After a heated exchange with the previous commenter, I finally agreed to disagree. Situations such as the CCHS dress code crackdown and the Nivea advertisement controversy prompt educators to consider and reconsider the circumstances in which African American culture might be deemed appropriate in educational settings. Although this book focuses on African American language practices, not African American hair, clothing, and dress, I argue that a rejection of Ebonics in mainstream settings, like the rejection of African American hair and appearance, is a rejection of African American culture. Denying a culture its rich heritage and style requires us to rethink the appropriateness and inclusion of Afrocentricity in educational settings.

*Afrocentric Teacher-Research: Rethinking Appropriateness and Inclusion* reports on a qualitative teacher-research study that examines the ways in which African American and other students perform expository writing tasks using an Afrocentric Ebonics-focused first-year writing curriculum. Foundational to the book is a study of 21 student writers and their class that employs an Afrocentric Ebonics-based curriculum. Further, this book conceptualizes a theory of Afrocentric teacher-research that includes all students, not only African Americans, and positions teacher-research as a methodology that transforms not only classroom practices but also disciplinary conversations by urging rhetoric and composition teachers and scholars to revise the way that we study Afrocentric pedagogies and Ebonics-based linguistic activities. This book extends discussions of language rights pedagogy by arguing that (1) Ebonics-based linguistic and rhetorical practices can be employed appropriately in academic writing and (2) Afrocentric Ebonics-based pedagogies can be inclusive of not just African American students but all students. In essence, this book argues that we should take rhetoric and composition's ethos with respect to language diversity seriously by showing that African American students can use home languages with dexterity and that a pedagogy of linguistic diversity develops a self-consciousness about language that helps all students understand language use and writing.

This book further responds to the following needs in relation to Afrocentric pedagogy and linguistic diversity:

- The need to broaden our understanding of appropriate contexts for writing in Ebonics and how Afrocentric pedagogy opens up these possibilities: The findings of my study reveal that African American students employ Ebonics-based syntactical patterns strategically and appropriately across a variety of genres and writing situations.

- The need to uncover how an Afrocentric curriculum supports and includes all students: Most research on Afrocentric pedagogy (Richardson 2003; Gilyard and Richardson 2001) demonstrates how such an approach and the use of Ebonics open up possibilities for African American students. In contrast, the findings from my study indicate that an Afrocentric curriculum supports all students in meeting institutional writing programmatic goals.
- The need to transform not only teacher attitudes toward the stigmatization of Ebonics, but also student attitudes: By revisiting the call to introduce and expose our students to language rights resolutions and linguistic research on legitimacy and stigmatization, this book responds to the problem that Leah Zuidema articulates in “Myth Education: Rationale and Strategies for Teaching Against Linguistic Prejudice” (2005). I present findings that chart existing progress and also identify areas for additional progress in attitudes toward the legitimacy of Ebonics.

In response to these needs, *Afrocentric Teacher-Research* provides a writing curriculum model that emerges from theories and applications of Afrocentric pedagogy in the classroom. Specific writing assignments and activities are included and analyzed. A long-standing complaint in linguistic diversity scholarship (Gilyard and Richardson 2003; Ball and Lardner 2005; Kinloch 2005; Redd and Schuster Webb 2005; Lovejoy et al. 2009) is that few curricular materials and resources are available for teachers who want to implement linguistically diverse pedagogies in postsecondary composition classes. In response, this book offers a curricular model accessible to instructors and writing program administrators.

Another purpose of this book is to offer a programmatic policy model for linguistic diversity that becomes possible from teacher-research, a model that extends to language across the curriculum pedagogy. Although previous teacher-research on Afrocentric pedagogy has opened up possibilities for African American students’ Ebonics-based writing in the classroom (Ball 1996; Richardson; Gilyard and Richardson 2001), that body of research has supported primarily the use of Ebonics as appropriate in only a few limited contexts and writing situations that include essay exams and creative writing assignments (Smitherman 1993; Ball 1996; Gilyard and Richardson 2001; Fogel and Ehrl 2006; Szpara and Wylie 2007). In contrast to those previous studies, this book uncovers how Ebonics-based writing is also appropriate in additional expository contexts, including formal research essays. This finding, in turn, suggests that writing programs should revise language policies. To extend conversations concerning language rights pedagogy, I make suggestions for what linguistically diverse programmatic policies can look like in university writing programs.

In Chapter 1, “Theoretical Foundations for Afrocentricity and Ebonics,” I theorize how Afrocentric pedagogy previously has been understood and

situated in multiple disciplines including education, sociolinguistics, and rhetoric and composition. With reference to earlier scholarship, I articulate a theory of Afrocentric pedagogy that (1) clarifies the relationship between Afrocentric pedagogy and the African and African American worldview, and (2) explains the relationship between Afrocentric pedagogy and Ebonics.

In Chapter 2, "African American Worldviews: Practical Applications in the First-Year Writing Classroom," I shift the focus from theories of Afrocentricity and Ebonics to applications of explicit pedagogical practices. I specifically apply these practices to the understanding of the African American worldview outlined in Chapter 1, and further provide a method that encourages all students to think critically about linguistic diversity in relation to Ebonics. This chapter concludes with advice for first-year writing teachers who seek to design Afrocentric and linguistic diversity curricula.

In Chapter 3, "Afrocentric Pedagogy: Implications for Using Teacher-Research to Transform Classroom and Disciplinary Practices," I review previous classroom and teacher-research studies on African American students that incorporate Afrocentric pedagogy and/or Ebonics. I extend these teacher- and classroom-research studies by including a discussion of phonology and African and African American students' purposeful uses of Ebonics phonology and syntax, as well as data from non-black students that point to how they also might benefit from Afrocentric pedagogy. These examples are used as a lens for understanding the data and results interpreted in Chapters 4 and 5.

In Chapter 4, "African American Students and *They* Writing: A Rhetoric of Appropriateness," I provide rhetorical analysis of African American students' expository writing assignments. Data results from African American students reflect the ways that they use Ebonics phonology and syntax strategically, purposefully, and rhetorically in major writing assignments. These results further open up possibilities for rethinking appropriate contexts for Ebonics' structural features in academic writing. In Chapter 5, "Afrocentricity for All Students: Toward a Pedagogy of Inclusion," I look more specifically at students' discussions of Ebonics in relation to programmatic goals.

In the final chapter, "Rethinking Inclusion and Appropriateness in Writing Programmatic and Institutional Designs: A View from Oakland," I discuss implications for rhetoric and composition that must be considered in forwarding the struggle for the Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL). I argue that we must revise not only our programmatic and institutional policies concerning linguistic diversity, but also linguistic diversity policies themselves, in ways that give focus and centrality to the struggle for students' rights. In taking this stance, I suggest that inclusive linguistic diversity policies offer opportunities for rethinking language across the curriculum. I compare the Oakland, CA school district's failure to persuade various stakeholders and society at large of the values of Ebonics with

composition's failure to legitimize alternative language varieties beyond the field. In essence, I call for the field to establish a firmer relationship with institutional writing programs and language across the curriculum movements.

On the whole, Afrocentric research aims to make sense of the relationships between cultural epistemologies and knowledge, communicative practices, and disciplinary implications. It is my hope that students, composition teachers, and writing program administrators (WPAs) will all benefit from the study of students' writing. To this end, *Afrocentric Teacher-Research* acknowledges the contributions that African American linguistic practices add to scholarly and intellectual traditions; more importantly, it invites composition scholars, administrators, and teachers to understand these contributions as complex, rich, and sophisticated strategies that can enhance the ways that we and our intellectual colleagues across the disciplines understand the relationships between rhetoric, writing, and literacy within the academy. Because recent events such as the controversy over the Nivea advertisement demonstrate that the public continues to reject the appropriateness of African American culture—including our clothing, our hairstyles, and our communicative behaviors—now is the *kairotic* moment that gives composition practitioners an opportunity to resist rejections of the African American cultural tradition, as we welcome, affirm, and celebrate the richness of African American discursive practices in our classrooms. In short, the time has come for composition to demonstrate that African American students can and do exhibit and showcase the richness of the African American linguistic competencies successfully.





# Chapter One

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## Theoretical Foundations for Afrocentricity and Ebonics

One of the challenges confronting Afrocentric scholars is the need to position Afrocentricity away from a Eurocentric/European gaze. This challenge is not new, especially for African Americans familiar with intraracial conflict: The fear of sounding or acting too white (Ratcliffe 2005; Young 2007; Kennedy and Middleton 2005) affects not only black adolescents and college students, but also Afrocentric scholars. Afrocentric and African American scholars indeed walk a slippery path any time we theorize about or publish on topics of African American life.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, if we represent an African American perspective that relies too heavily on European influences, we're accused of selling out; on other hand, if we completely disassociate ourselves from European influences, we risk alienating not only the European American colleagues with whom we work on a daily basis, but also students—including European American students—who don't share our perspectives or cultural epistemologies.

In this chapter, and throughout this book, I've attempted to walk this tightrope by presenting a theoretical framework of Afrocentricity that pays respect to the African-based worldviews and cultural traditions that inform its grounding. At the same time, I aim to present this framework in a way that includes non-African-based cultural traditions, while placing Afrocentric thought at the center of scholastic inquiry. I do so by focusing on something that all students—including first-year writing students—have in common: language. In other words, I use language as the common denominator for understanding and articulating (a) the relationship between Afrocentricity and communication and (b) the relationship between the communicative traditions of African Americans and the communicative traditions in which my first-year writing students locate themselves.

This chapter unpacks how Afrocentricity is understood and situated in this book by explaining the relationship between the concept of Afrocentricity and Ebonics<sup>2</sup> as an African-based cultural and communicative practice. I also discuss the relationship between Afrocentric pedagogy and African worldviews—a discussion that is necessary in order to make sense of the philosophies and ideologies that inform how I understand Afrocentric thought in the classroom. While the focus of this project deals with the first-year writing classroom, it is necessary to identify

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1 While there are significant cultural differences between Africans and African Americans, I position Afrocentricity in relation to the African worldviews that inform the cultural traditions that African Americans share in a U.S. context.

2 In the context of this book, the terms *Ebonics*, *African American Language (AAL)*, and *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)* are used to accommodate different terminology used by referenced authors and researchers.