
Reviewed by Jacqueline Bacon

In the foreword to Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson’s collection African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Jacqueline Jones Royster articulates the book’s central concerns in the form of a question: “What parameters can we use to begin a more thoughtful and useful consideration of African Americans in rhetorical space?” (ix). In subsequent chapters, different approaches to this query as well as varied answers emerge. Parameters of inquiry may involve the theoretical tools we use for analyzing African American rhetoric and/or the ways we teach and evaluate student writing. What constitutes usefulness depends upon a scholar’s disciplinary or pedagogical needs. Rhetorical space is a shifting terrain, encompassing the classroom, the platform, the pulpit, and cyberspace. Through insightful textual and pedagogical studies grounded in various theoretical and historical approaches, African American Rhetoric(s) challenges scholars to empower students and other rhetors by, in Richardson’s terms, “writing new stories of African American literacy and rhetorical education” (159).

“African American rhetoric(s),” Richardson and Jackson note in their preface, refers to “the study of culturally and discursively developed knowledge-forms, communicative practices and persuasive strategies rooted in freedom struggles by people of African ancestry in America” (xiii). This critical approach allows not only for analyses of discourse but also considerations of how we can “better accommodate the development of empowering rhetoric” (xiii). Keith Gilyard’s introduction provides a comprehensive historical overview of the field, from nineteenth-century examinations of African American oratory to contemporary studies.

The chapters in part one, “Historicizing and Analyzing African American Rhetoric(s),” feature various approaches to the study of African American discourse, past and present. Logan focuses in chapter 1 on the “racialized and gendered presumptions” that shaped reactions to the rhetoric of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and her responses. In chapters 2 and 3, Kali Tal and Gwendolyn D. Pough examine the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. Tal focuses on the contemporary images that have replaced the Panthers’ original rhetoric, and Pough features the factors that caused the Party’s rhetoric to fail to “move the people toward revolution” (61). In chapter 4, Jacqueline Bryant analyzes instances of Afrocentric rhetoric in Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Kimmika L. H. Williams explores in chapter 5 the influence of Zora Neale Hurston and Geneva Smitherman on the study of African American rhetoric as well as African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Part two, “Visions for Pedagogy of African American rhetoric,” takes up issues related to teaching composition and rhetoric. Clinton Crawford, in chapter
6, argues for the origins of rhetoric in Africa, particularly Kemet (ancient Egypt), Nubia, and Ethiopia. In chapters 7 and 8, Lena Ampadu and Elaine Richardson offer studies from their own classrooms. Ampadu describes engaging her students in “imitation of African American texts as linguistic models,” helping them to replicate “oral practices in writing” (136). Richardson discusses “the academic personas acquired by two African American students,” one of whom followed “the path of the vernacular” (163) while the other tried to remove “her AAVE voice” from her writing (166). In chapter 9, Victoria Cliett examines signifying in the work of Frederick Douglass and David Walker.

In part three, “Visions for Research in African American Rhetoric(s),” five scholars consider models and concerns that can direct new research and determine the future of the field. Adam J. Banks argues in chapter ten that technology must be engaged as “one of the major battlegrounds for African American struggle” (190), since “communication technologies” always influence and shape “rhetorical production” (194). In chapter 11, Kermit Campbell makes the case for the influence of the Amistad Africans on American oratorical culture. In chapter 12, Vorris Nunley theorizes “hush harbor rhetoric,” discourse arising from spaces in which “Black folks affirm, share, and negotiate African American epistemologies and resist and subvert hegemonic Whiteness” (222). Joyce Irene Middleton examines in chapter 13 how Toni Morrison’s work on language and culture can help us understand the implications of writing in a racialized society and create empowering pedagogies. In the final chapter, William W. Cook argues that because African American rhetoric allows for resistance to dominant forms and paradigms, it can, ultimately, “readjust and redefine the norms of language making” (268) that often silence and oppress.

Although the anthology offers a range of diverse, innovative studies, certain themes resonate throughout the collection and illustrate central concerns. Various scholars note the complex relationship of African American rhetorics to both African linguistic concepts and cosmologies and to authoritarian discourses. Since, as Cliett indicates, the “culture of Black struggle is not in agreement with the ideologies of Standard English,” our goal should be not merely to create competence with conventional discourses but to encourage language uses that “communicate ideas effectively” and “revise unjust texts of the world” (182). In some cases, strategies depend upon African retentions. Understanding the African concept of nommo, or the generative power of the word, for example, can yield productive analyses of the rhetoric of historical figures such as Harriet Jacobs and Maria W. Stewart (as in Bryant’s and Ampadu’s chapters, respectively) or contemporary rhetorics such as preaching. Crawford argues that a return to the values of ancient African cultures—such as “speaking and doing right” and fostering “human harmony with nature and cosmos”—allows us to appreciate the “creative genius and rhetoric” of people of African descent throughout history as well as to remedy the “disintegration of our educational system” (132-34).
African American rhetoric also revises and transforms conventional linguistic models; it is, in Cook’s works, “in both a resistant and symbiotic relationship to the dominant discourses with which it is engaged” (259). Signifying is perhaps the most striking example, and its historical importance has implications for contemporary pedagogy. As Cliett argues, the “metacritique on the shaping of discourses and cultures” (186) that emerges within signifying is instructive for contemporary teachers of composition. Nunley’s “hush harbor rhetorics” also make visible the ways that certain notions—such as “civility, consensus, tolerance”—are in fact constructions that empower some and oppress; challenging these norms can create empowering, “transgressive classroom spaces” (238).

That teachers of writing need to be open to what Richardson calls the “alternative literacies” and “counterlanguage” (156-57) that arise from the experiences and traditions of students of color is illustrated throughout the book. AAVE, in particular, is a dynamic language that is, in Williams’s terms, “African-centered” and able to express “the breath and depth of African American experience” as “unadulterated English” cannot (101). Like other discourses of people of color, AAVE has been devalued, but this perspective not only misses the eloquent, persuasive appeals and knowledge-making strategies that are found in AAVE but also can devastate students whose authentic voices are silenced or denigrated. Richardson’s chapter relates, for example, that the student who used vernacular linguistic strategies found his work was devalued by instructors although it was based on a “way of knowing” that was “sustaining” for him (166), while the student who suppressed her AAVE was rewarded with a higher grade even though her writing was neither original nor particularly expressive.

The discrepancy Richardson highlights illustrates another key theme of the anthology: control of one’s rhetoric is the key to agency and freedom. Various examples in the book suggest the potential empowerment that results from management of one’s discourse and the damage that can result when others have control. Banks notes that technology can be empowering for people of color, from Dr. King’s “grasp of how television worked as a rhetorical tool” (198), to Hip Hop, to the ways one can take “more direct control of one’s message” in cyberspace (195). It can also further oppress, if closing the so-called Digital Divide is considered an end in itself rather than providing “meaningful access” and communicative control to technology for people of color (201). And even tools that start out in the hands of people of color may be taken over by others. Tal maintains that the critical, politically astute rhetoric of the Black Panthers has been transformed into “White-constructed, Black-reconstructed popular culture iconography” that ironically “[promotes] the very capitalist structures the Panthers sought to destroy” (56).

African American Rhetoric(s) clearly establishes the dynamic nature of African American discourse and its ongoing relevance and resonance for all students and scholars of rhetoric. Logan demonstrates that audiences do not just “respond” to speakers such as Frances Harper; “Black women rhetors” take agency and draw on “a range of rhetorical practices to teach their audiences” (35). AAVE, Williams
and Richardson emphasize, encourages creativity and the development of a rhetor’s unique voice. Crawford, Ampadu, and Nunley show how texts ranging from the ancient Egyptian Instructions of Ptahhotep to Henry Highland Garnet 1848 “Address to the Slaves in the United States of America” to popular musical lyrics can and do invigorate rhetoric and writing classrooms. This generative energy produces new forms and methods continually, reminding us that, as Cook affirms, “The end is not in sight. . . . [T]here is no end” (270).

San Diego, CA