

## INTRODUCTION

### *Toward Long Overdue Recognition of Research Concerning African American Communication and Identities*

This collection showcases and celebrates some of the foundational and contemporary pioneering and pivotal works of scholars who have contributed to what is now known as African American Communication Studies. In presenting this volume of identity-focused approaches to African American communication of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I am in no way suggesting that this is an exclusive set of essays to which there is no equally rigorous match. However, the essays included here are quite significant for what they tell us about the distinctive confluence between communication and African American identities.

#### THE RESULT OF EXPORTING AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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Just as we communicologists have, for years, imported the works of other disciplines, we have also exported our works. In fact, according to a recent bibliography of African American communication research compiled by Ronald Jamal Stephens (2000), the majority of African American communication scholarship is published in interdisciplinary periodicals and small, independently run academic presses. As a result, for years there has been the presumption that African American communication scholarship primarily exists in the form of unpublished papers presented at professional conferences—such as that of the National Communication Association—or not at all. In fact, however, an exhaustive search within and among journals in other fields uncovers a significant body of published writings pertaining to this variegated research area. Because I have done so elsewhere (Jackson, 2000), I will not explore the reasons here for this cross-pollination. It is my intuition that this has not been considered a real problem because the communication literature has been, instead, richly populated with articles and books that affirm the importance of culturally homogeneous ways of knowing, and these ways of knowing supposedly have satisfied the interests of the intellectual masses. I contend that this view limits our knowledge and stunts our curiosity about communicative and cultural particularities.

### My Early Academic Reflections about the Perceived Absence of African American Communication Research

I can vividly remember the brief span between the time I received my bachelor's degree and the time I began work on my master's. I began to wonder whether there were any Black communication researchers and, certainly, whether African American identities were of any real concern to those who were entrusted to study and teach about human interaction. Until my doctoral program, I had no idea that there was a vast literature replete with scholars who were dedicated to exploring African American communicative experiences. I felt invalidated, alone, devalued, and dismissed. All throughout my doctoral program, I kept those previously felt emotions in mind and committed myself to introducing a volume such as this one to the world. In centralizing the contributions of stalwart communication scholars whose works are exemplary of fine innovative research, I want all readers, especially those just now being exposed to this broad area of inquiry, to know that the intellectual legacies of those who study African American communication have not been forgotten. Furthermore, this book is a tribute to them and a direct source of inspiration to other contemporary African American cultural researchers working to expand this branch of research to represent even more African American communicative and cultural experiences. This is a venture by which we not only collectively celebrate research but also celebrate our identities and, indeed, our very humanity.

### Born Out of Necessity

There is an old folk saying that necessity is the mother of invention. In other words, some things are brought forth into being by virtue of perceived absence or need. *African American Communication and Identities: Essential Readings* was born out of a need to acknowledge African American communication research and hold it in value alongside other culturally specific approaches to and studies of human interaction.

Unfortunately, within the province of communication research, scholars are both subjected to and participate in the production of a presumably panoptic—and, incidentally, hegemonic—range of insights concerning human interaction. Nearly the entire body of communication literature embraces exclusively the perspectives of European Americans and their European predecessors. This culturally myopic cognitive and intellectual set frequently devalues the cultural specificities of human communicative experiences. In doing so, the multidisciplinary field of communication has been debilitated. For this reason, the book is not called simply *African American Communication* but is, instead, called *African American Communication and Identities: Essential Readings* because it is critical to accent the constitutive aspects of African American communication behaviors as they relate to how African Americans define themselves culturally. As Collins (1990) and Asante (1987) teach us, we are no more able to separate an author from her writings than we are to isolate African Americans from their cultures and, hence, their indigenous identities.

A tremendous amount of evidence suggests that during and prior to the development of European-centered paradigms concerning rhetoric, language, and also discourses pertaining to interpersonal, group, organizational, and mass-mediated relationships, there were also African-centered, Asian-centered, Native American- and Hispanic-centered paradigms developing around these ideas. Some of this proliferation of communication-related discourses and paradigms has been uncovered gradually throughout the last fifty years. The fascinating and unfortunate implicit commentary that exists as

a corollary to this absence is that these non-European discourses do not matter; this volume is testament to the fact that they do.

### The Process of Selecting Essays for Inclusion

Despite the fact that this is a book of reprinted articles and essays that originally appeared in academic journals and books, it is no small task to assemble a volume of this nature. There are literally hundreds of essays that can qualify as African American communication studies. The process of selecting essays for *African American Communication and Identities: Essential Readings* began in the summer of 2000 and ended in January, 2003. To ensure that this first-of-a-kind book was reflective of an entire scholarly community's contributions to the field of African American communication, I decided to invite that community of researchers to participate in the essay selection process. It began in the largest known academic contingencies of African American communicologists, the National Communication Association's Black Caucus and African American Communication and Culture Division, comprised of over 400 members collectively. I sent members a two-page electronic survey asking them to identify works that they considered significant and foundational to African American communicology. I made additional surveys available to members at the business meetings of these two units during the 2000 NCA convention. I directly contacted several dozen scholars and asked them to complete surveys. After we received about 75 surveys, Carlos Morrison, Trina Wright, and I noted consistencies among respondents and devised a list of approximately forty scholars and their pivotal essays. Initially, I intended to feature only landmark essays, but gradually there emerged a consensus among the three of us to diversify the volume, interspersing foundational as well as recent but significant essays. After the three of us made all the selections, Carlos and I conducted additional independent searches of scholars we may have overlooked. Subsequently, we shared our findings, and I narrowed the list even further after Jennifer Warren, my graduate research assistant, and I uncovered additional sources and considered publisher limitations. The result of this extensive process is the volume you hold in your hands.

### Layout of Book

To examine the micro-communicative aspects of African American communication, we've arranged the text into six parts. We begin with the theoretical and rhetorical dimensions and move outward to broader contexts, such as that of relational, gendered, organizational, and mass mediated communication.

Part I, Theoretic Approaches to African American Communication and Identity, is comprised of five essays that primarily focus on new and refreshing conceptual innovations not theorized systematically by anyone else in the communication literature. Addressing paradigmatic notions of cultural personhood, self-esteem, rhetoric, discursive continuities from Africa, and nonverbal behavior, these writings are noted for their coherent explanations of previously unstudied facets of African American communicative behaviors within the field of communication. Part I seeks to answer in what ways can we conceptualize the unique communicative experiences of African Americans. Jack L. Daniel and Geneva Smitherman's classic article, "How I Got Over" begins this section. In it, they discuss the deep structures of African American culture that permeate communicative behaviors. Molefi Kete Asante, another of the pioneers of African American communication research, wrote the next essay concerning afrocentricity, in which he expands his discussion of this conceptual brainchild in

a much more explicative and systematic way than any of his other previously published essays. These heralded theoretic writings offer segue into the intellectually exciting essays that follow, essays concerned with racial complicity, Black kinesics, and theatrical improvisation, respectively. Certainly, the most unique features of these essays are their inherent cultural and communicationist posture.

Part II, African American Rhetoric and Language, includes four essays that are significant works authored by trailblazers in African American communication research. Each of them, with the exception of Eric King Watts' more recent study, is a very well-known treatment of African American rhetorical and/or linguistic nuances. Their placement in a book of this nature is indisputable. Deborah F. Atwater's exploratory thinkpiece leads this discussion of rhetoric and language with challenges to the field, ones that still confront us today. The remaining essays answer the challenge in different ways, with detailed analyses of African American ethos, culturally specific discursive devices, and a discussion of linguistic continuities and Black community preservation of ancestral linguistic norms.

Part III of the book is titled African American Communication in Relational Contexts. Within this section, four chapters cover relational dimensions of African American identities, from issues of communication satisfaction to friendship, marriage, and homosexual relationships. The essays in this section explicate communicative experiences in platonic, romantic, and family arrangements. Each chapter is innovative. Although there were many studies that predated the ones found here, this area of interpersonal communication study has only recently expanded to include such a wide range of African American communication issues, which is why so many of the studies are fairly recent. Michael L. Hecht, Sidney Ribeau, and J. K. Alberts penned the first essay in this section. They help set the tone for an ensuing discussion of conversation and relational improvement strategies that cross racial boundaries and permeate varying relational contexts, including friendship, dating, and marital relationships.

Communicating African American Gendered Identities is the name of Part IV of this collection. Although all five of the studies in this section were written in the last decade, each offers innovative conceptions of African American gendered identities that were virtually absent prior to their emergence. Marsha Houston, who many consider the pioneer of African American women's communication research, has only recently spoken specifically of African American women without reference to men or White women. It is this essay that sets the pace for coming generations of scholars who will find it appropriate to study African American women on their own. Jackson and Dangerfield's essay, the final one in this section of the book, seems on the surface to have presented the opposite perspective. We theorize about African American men and masculinities, but we do insist on introducing women into the discussion and allow for the possibility that women might also be masculine. Each of the essays in this section addresses new and refreshing aspects of African American gendered realities.

Part V, African American Communication and Identities in Organizational and Instructional Contexts, combines organizational and instructional communication studies. The four essays in this section are fairly new heuristic contributions to the study of African Americans. The section begins with Brenda J. Allen's essay, the pioneering work that has reintroduced many scholars to the significance of research on diversity in organizations. Allen's influence on research concerning Black women's organizational experiences is profound and is only hinted at in her essay, but Patricia S. Parker continues Allen's line of research while establishing her own presence in her exploration of Black women executives' communicative experiences in dominant culture organizations. Subsequently, this section shifts to include the instructional communication literature, which is particularly limited by so few studies concerning African

Americans. Katherine Grace Hendrix offers insights into issues of students' perceived credibility of their professors. Her work is monumental for the field of communication and nicely contributes to the instructional literature. My essay on identity negotiation within the institutional structure of some academic contexts rounds out this section. These new essays offer a clear set of ideas that are cogently presented and pivotal.

The final section of the book, Part VI, includes essays concerning African American identities in mass mediated contexts. With the exception of Squires' chapter, these essays are well known treatments of African Americans in the mass media. Clearly, this section, as all of the other sections, could have been much larger. There are dozens of studies on print, electronic and televisual journalism, radio, television, and film. Although this section does not include research on advertising, there are dozens of sources on African Americans and advertising (Kern-Foxworth, 1994; Turner, 1994). Nonetheless, this segment related to mass media depictions and programming offers a nice sampling of extant research in the area of African American communication.

From the conceptual frameworks presented in Part I to the media studies in Part VI, each of the essays in this book constitutes a small but very significant portion of the research on African American communication. It is important to recognize, however, that space limitations omitted several pivotal works by scholars such as Orlando Taylor, Dorothy Pennington, Teresa Nance, Terry Orbuch, Stanley Gaines, Lyndrey Niles, Keith Gilyard, bell hooks, Bishetta Merritt, Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, Jeanette Dates, Mark Orbe, Aaron Gresson, William Pipes, Carter G. Woodson, Halle Quinn Brown, Chief Fela Sowande, and John Lucaites. Even this is not an exhaustive list of researchers who represent a wide range of interdisciplinary scholarship covering issues of African American identity. While I edited this book with a spirit of inclusiveness, I also regret that I could not include all of the landmark and pivotal essays in the field of African American communication.

In many ways, this book is an act of recovery. It is my sincere hope that scholars who write communication textbooks and scholarly monographs will cite these readings ad infinitum. The contributors to this volume deserve it, for they have left us an intellectual legacy of issues, challenges, needs, and paradigms that, in the end, seek to secure a space for the celebration of African Americans, their identities and their everyday lives.

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