

## From Complicity to Coherence: Rereading the Rhetoric of Afrocentricity

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Molefi Kete Asante's *Afrocentricity* offers an analysis of the role of Africa in postmodern history that calls into question many of the basic assumptions of Western thought. Critics of Afrocentric thought contend that it advocates a wholesale rejection of Eurocentric worldviews and illustrates an underlying paradox that emerges in much postmodern thought: the complicitous acceptance of the assumptions of essentialism. This essay explores this paradox by illustrating the common grounds of Afrocentric and Eurocentric thought, the extent to which each way of knowing is implicated in the other, and the possibility of moving beyond the complicity of essentialist epistemology to a coherent integration of opposites.

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C ONTEMPORARY DEBATES CONCERNING THE ROLE of Afrocentricity in multicultural education have only begun to address what Na'im Akbar (1991) has referred to as the "challenge of implementation." According to Akbar, Afrocentricity "will no doubt usher in a universal reanalysis of Western scholarship in which people will boldly bring the particular perspective of their diversity to the table of human commonality" (p. 36). Unfortunately, the intellectual and social impact of Afrocentricity has not yet resulted in such an analysis, and instead has been circumscribed by a complicitous acceptance of problematical assumptions. This complicity emerges at the pragmatic, theoretical, and epistemological levels, and has undermined the articulation of the humanistic *praxis* called for by Akbar and other proponents of the Afrocentric agenda. Opponents of the Afrocentric perspective, such as Diane Ravitch, have argued that it is a form of "racial fundamentalism" and that it is "based on claims that have not been validated by reputable scholars" (quoted in Magner, 1991, p. A13). The claims that Afrocentricity is based upon faulty argumentation and a questionable theoretical orientation are further problematized by the depiction of its agenda as an adherence to the very epistemic stance it calls into question: the totalizing discourse of Eurocentric essentialism that has, for centuries, categorized and defined African culture and its contributions in terms of negative difference.<sup>1</sup>

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This essay explores the Afrocentricity debate through a consideration of how each of these concerns points to the need for an alternative methodological approach which addresses Afrocentricity's complicitous acceptance of essentialism. The complicity of Afrocentricity is most clearly exemplified by its articulation as "an intentionally aggressive polemic," and as "an assault on the European paradigm; a repudiation of its essence" (Ani, 1994, p. 1), not simply because this position illustrates the oppositional tendencies peculiar to argumentative essentialism, but also because it fails to emphasize what I will suggest is the underlying epistemological assumptions of an Afrocentric perspective: the coherent integration of similarity and difference. The rupture between these two notions in Afrocentric thought is evident in Molefi Kete Asante's suggestion that Afrocentricity "is a *totally different* orientation to reality based on *harmonious coexistence* of an endless variety of cultures" (quoted in Petrie, 1991, p. 21, italics added). While this description might simply be viewed as an internal contradiction between the binary oppositions of "totally different" and the complementarities of "harmonious coexistence," it might also be seen as illustrative of the epistemological complicity of critiques advanced not only by proponents of Afrocentricity, but also by many critics of hegemonic oppression.

Several scholars have explored how essentialist assumptions are implicated in complicity with oppression,<sup>2</sup> and this analysis is also applicable to this consideration of Afrocentricity. In amplifying my earlier (1991) explication of the problematic of essentialism in the politics of identity, this essay first examines the positions presented by proponents and opponents of Afrocentricity, then illustrates their common acceptance of the oppositional relationship between the Afrocentric and Eurocentric paradigms, and finally suggests an alternative based upon "rhetorical coherence" that emphasizes the interdependence of the two paradigms. By focusing on the common grounds of the Afrocentric and Eurocentric perspectives, I will show that the understanding of the two as competing and mutually exclusive worldviews is grounded in essentialist presuppositions, and that a coherent analysis illustrates the theoretical and practical value of viewing the relationship between Eurocentricity and Afrocentricity as a dynamic interplay of complementaries rather than a conflict of *essentially* competitive worldviews. This approach is wholly consistent with the Afrocentric agenda and offers a perspective that addresses the challenge articulated by Akbar and demanded by Asante's emphasis on "the belief in the centrality of Africans in post-modern history" (1989, p. 6). Asante's definition of Afrocentricity in these terms has contributed significantly to the extent to which the debates concerning this concept have been cast in terms of the problematic politics of cultural and racial identity.

The underlying epistemological assumptions that circumscribe these debates signal the need for a shift from foundationist and externalist

theories of knowledge to a coherentist orientation. Both foundationism and externalism ground the antagonism between Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity within the domain of essentially contested positions: Foundationism emphasizes the self-evident "truths" of racial identity, and externalism embraces the empirical "facts" of domination based upon difference. Coherence offers a more nuanced reading of the relationship between the two by recognizing that neither epistemic stance adequately accounts for the subjective dimensions of human knowledge and the extent to which both "truths" and "facts" are socially and symbolically constructed. Coherence, thus, offers an integrated understanding of both identity and difference, and illustrates the extent to which their articulation is constrained by a larger system of beliefs that circumscribes the problems and possibilities of implementing and sustaining alternative ways of knowing and being. An examination of the role that essentialized notions of racial identity and difference plays in this larger system of beliefs provides a starting point for moving from complicity to coherence in the rhetoric of Afrocentricity.

#### Afrocentricity, Multiculturalism, and the Rhetoric of Racial Difference

Molefi Kete Asante is without question the foremost Afrocentric scholar in the field of communication, and his work has been instrumental in shaping the theoretical and pedagogical articulations and contributions of Afrocentricity. He views Afrocentricity as an essential component of multiculturalism, and he contends that "there can be no true multiculturalism without Afrocentricity." Asante depicts Afrocentricity as a "complementary" worldview; he contends that it "is not the opposite of Eurocentricism, nor does it seek to replace Eurocentricism." Rather, as Asante explains it, Afrocentricity represents "pluralism without hierarchy," and "should take its place not above but alongside other cultural and historical perspectives" (quoted in Petrie, 1991, p. 21). The final test of Afrocentricity, Asante argues, is its incorporation into the center of one's identity, and this incorporation occurs not through coercion or conversion, but through conscious acceptance and enlightened understanding: "Afrocentricity does not convert you by appealing to hatred or lust or greed or violence. As the highest, most conscious ideology, it makes its points, motivates its adherents, and captivates the cautious by the force of its truth. You are its ultimate test" (1989, p. 6). Afrocentricity has powerful rhetorical implications, not only in terms of persuasibility, but also as a force for the generation and transformation of social and cultural reality.

Not all scholars, however, view these implications as either practical or desirable. Hazzard-Gordon, for example, argues that "Afrocentricity as a construct for empowerment raises more questions than it answers," and she suggests that the "rhetoric" of Afrocentricity must more fully address African-American material "reality." Afrocentricity "helps blacks survive and meet the challenge to their ethnic integrity, social

honor and cultural validity posed by the white academy," according to Hazzard-Gordon. "Ultimately, however, students of Afrocentric theory must confront the wider socioeconomic and racial realities of this nation and its ostrich-like ideology of denial" (quoted in Petrie, 1991, p. 22). While Hazzard-Gordon believes, like Akbar, that the major challenge facing students of Afrocentricity is one of implementation, other scholars argue that much of what Afrocentricity has to offer has little intellectual value. West (1993) for example, depicts Afrocentricists as "race-embracing rebels" who "delimit their literary productivity and sap their intellectual creativity. Hence, rhetoric becomes a substitute for analysis, stimulatory rapping a replacement for serious reading, and uncreative publications an expression of existential catharsis. Much, though not all, of Afrocentric thought fits this bill" (p 43). West's observations, though offering a rather limited and unfortunate understanding of "rhetoric," nonetheless reflect concerns shared by other critics of Afrocentricity and the contributions it makes to multiculturalism.

In the field of communication, where "rhetoric" is fortunately understood in terms of its classical emphasis on persuasion and its contemporary appreciation of the generative dimensions of discourse, concerns similar to West's have nonetheless been articulated. Condit and Lucaites (1993) suggest that Afrocentricity's agenda is undergirded by a racial essentialism that "extends the principle of multiculturalism to its furthest conceptual extreme":

The Afrocentric perspective takes the differences between the descendants of Africans and Europeans and magnifies them to their purest, most heightened imaginable form. It treats these descendants as wholly beholden in this historical moment to values and conditions that existed hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Moreover, it holds that these European and African traditions were based on fundamentally different root values. Europe is generally portrayed by Afrocentricists as individualist, ambitious, future-oriented, ruthless, and intellectual. Africa is generally portrayed as communal, experientially rich, presentist, humane, and emotional. The two cultures are thus characterized as diametrically opposed to one another. (p. 209)

While Condit and Lucaites base their description of Afrocentricity on Asante's (1987) *Afrocentric Idea*, as well as some more extreme examples of the perspective presented by Jeffries,<sup>3</sup> their depiction does not do justice to the diverse voices that have contributed to the definition and articulation of the concept. They have, however, correctly identified the most controversial and problematic aspects of the theory: its essentialist depiction of differences between African and European cultures. This depiction plays an important role in debates between proponents and opponents of Afrocentricity in particular, and it has important implications for the debate between supporters and opponents of multiculturalism as well.<sup>4</sup>

The essentializing of difference is evident in Asante's (1989) description of the "essential grounds" of Afrocentricity: "There is first sug-

gested the existence of an African Cultural System; then the juxtaposition of African and American ways; and finally the values derived from the African-American experience" (p. 2). Each of these aspects of Afrocentricity highlights differences between African and European cultures and reflects a larger intellectual movement, manifest also in multiculturalism and other perspectives, that has called into question the hegemony of Western intellectual traditions and their essentializing social consequences. In addition to depicting the essential grounds of Afrocentricity, these three aspects of Afrocentricity also illustrate the essential issues at stake in the debate between Afrocentricists and their opponents: whether or not there is, in fact, an *essentially* "African" culture, whether or not African and American ways are *essentially* different, and whether or not there are specific values that are *essential* aspects of the African American experience. An exploration of some of the positions taken on each of these issues illustrates the difficulty of resolving the debate in the black and white terms of essentialist judgment.

#### *The African Ethos: Unity or Plurality?*

Two of the central concerns expressed in the Afrocentricity debate revolve around whether or not African culture had a decisive influence on the development of European civilizations, and whether or not it is possible to even speak of an "African Culture." Supporters of the Afrocentric perspective argue for the affirmative on both of these counts, grounding their views in the works of Diop (1974) and more recently Bernal (1987). Critics of Afrocentricity argue that claims of an African influence on the West are greatly exaggerated, and that the idea of a singular African identity is both theoretically and empirically insupportable. At issue in the debate is not only the "truth" of the claims advanced by the participants, but also their consequences, and the battle lines drawn by opponents and proponents are not always clear. Questions of historical accuracy, intellectual integrity, and racial oppression become entangled in arguments that perpetuate the very same essentialism to which the Afrocentric paradigm purports to provide a viable alternative.

Lefkowitz's (1992) criticism of the "Afro-centric Myth" attacks the accuracy of Afrocentric teachings in general, and those associated with Bernal's *Black Athena* in particular. Lefkowitz acknowledges that the "evidence of Egyptian influence on certain aspects of Greek culture is plain and undeniable," but she argues that the "evidence of Egyptian origins for Greek culture is another thing entirely" (p. 31). She traces the "myth" of the African origins of Ancient Greece through the writings of Marcus Garvey, Cheikh Anta Diop, George G. M. James, and finally Martin Bernal. While acknowledging Bernal's intellectual credentials, she nonetheless argues that his analysis "cannot be taken as positive

proof of an Egyptian presence in Greece" (p. 34). Although Lefkowitz does not question Bernal's credentials, she does question his integrity:

To the extent that Bernal has helped to provide an apparently respectable underpinning for Afrocentric fantasies, he must be held culpable, even if his intentions are honorable and his motives are sincere. His intellectual standards are higher than most of his fellow Afrocentrists (and much, much higher than the "standards" of "scholars" like Leonard Jeffries), but not even he has dealt with the racial issue squarely. (p. 35)

For Lefkowitz, the crux of the "racial issue" is whether or not the ancient Egyptians were in fact black: "Bernal would prefer to emphasize that Egypt is a part of Africa rather than try to determine the exact proportion of darker skinned central Africans in the population. To speak of the ancient (or modern) Egyptians as 'black' is misleading in the extreme." Lefkowitz goes on to argue that, even if the Egyptians were viewed as black, it would not have "mattered from the Greek point of view, since the Greeks classified people by nationality rather than skin color, as Snowden pointed out twenty years ago" (p. 35). This last observation offers a telling commentary on Lefkowitz's argument, and illustrates her own lack of fidelity to the standards of intellectual inquiry.

Indeed, if Bernal can be faulted for misreading ancient evidence, Lefkowitz might be also be faulted for reinterpreting Snowden's (1970) rather explicit and much more recent analysis. He writes in *Blacks in Antiquity*: "Color was obviously uppermost in the minds of the Greeks and Romans, whether they were describing Ethiopians in the land of their origin or their expatriated congeners in Egypt, Greece, or Italy. The distinguishing mark of an Ethiopian was the color of his skin" (p. 2). In addition to her rereading of Snowden, Lefkowitz's argument against Bernal, while calling for "positive proof," does not offer any more compelling "negative evidence," and her attack on the intellectual "standards" of Afrocentricists reflects an agenda not simply committed to finding out the "truth," but to defending the Western conceptualization of it. Lefkowitz is as much a defender of Eurocentricity as she is a critic of Afrocentricity, and her "scrupulous scholarly evaluation of the present evidence" reveals an unspoken commitment to the essentialist presuppositions and assumptions of the modernist enterprise called into question by Afrocentric scholars.

Less committed to that enterprise, but just as critical of Afrocentricity, is African philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, whose criticism of the paradigm's scholarly and social manifestations illustrates clear connections between complicity and Afrocentricity. "Like most cultural movements at full flood, this Afrocentricism is a composite of truth and error, insight and illusion, moral generosity and meanness. But the most striking thing about it is how thoroughly at home it is in the frameworks of nineteenth century European thought" (1993, p. 24). Appiah's analysis points to the epistemological difficulties of distinguishing between distinctly Eurocentric and Afrocentric cultural sensibili-

ties: "Once we see the essentially reactive structure of Afrocentricism—that it is simply Eurocentricism turned upside down—we can understand where its intellectual weaknesses lie" (1993, p. 24). Afrocentricity's two greatest weaknesses, Appiah suggests, are its failure to fully consider the logic of the origins argument, and its failure to provide compelling support for the claim of a distinctly African culture.

The origins argument, Appiah contends, would logically insist that the distinction between Eurocentric and Afrocentric culture is illusory, and would suggest that Afrocentricity has inherited a legacy of Eurocentric negativity: "Of course, if Greece grew out of Egypt and 'the West' grew out of Greece, then the West too is a moral asset of contemporary blacks, and its legacy of ethnocentrism presumably one of our moral liabilities" (p. 24). The claim to a distinctly African culture is also called into question by Appiah, and his position is supported by scholars of African origin: "The notion that there is something unitary called African culture that could be thus summarized has been subjected to devastating critique by a generation of African intellectuals. But little sign of these African accounts of African culture appears in the writings of Afrocentricism" (p. 25). Appiah correctly points out that other than Diop's work there is little acknowledgment of contemporary African philosophical perspectives, some of which depict many of the basic assumptions of Afrocentricity as "ethnophilosophical," and reject it as such. Indeed, some of the foundational works of Afrocentric thought have European origins, and it is to those works that we turn now in considering the second essential ground of Afrocentricity, "the juxtaposition of African and American ways."

### *The Eurocentric Roots of Afrocentricity*

The comparison and contrast of African and American ways was pursued in Asante's [Arthur L. Smith's] early writings in the exploration of the specific rhetorical strategies utilized by African-American orators as well as in his explication of the elements peculiar to an African conceptualization of rhetoric. In *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America*, Asante suggests that this juxtaposition of ways points to the African roots of African-American language and culture. "Black Americans are essentially an oral people much like their African ancestors who found the expressive word to be a basis of society" (1972, p. x). African cultural influences are seen, for Asante and other theorists, as the foundation for any meaningful discussion of language in the black community, and essential to a proper understanding of African-American speech and symbolic interaction. Asante contends that "a theory of language and rhetoric which does not take the uniqueness of black language behavior into consideration is hardly valid in the light of the work presented in this volume" (p. xi). The differences between African and American ways are, in this early work,

situated in different strategic and conceptual approaches to language and its uses.

Asante suggests that the rhetorical strategies peculiar to African-American discourse reflect the historical exigencies of race relations in America as well as the philosophical and epistemic influences of traditional African culture. His analysis of revolutionary rhetoric suggests that its grounding in oppositional consciousness was rooted in the religious traditions of slavery, and that one of the key themes of such rhetoric was its emphasis on unity and the distinctiveness of black identity. Asante's explication of black protest speaking points to both social constraints and cultural influences as determining factors in the different styles employed by rhetors in their interactions with white and black audiences. His exploration of social and historical perspectives on black oratory argues for an understanding of the African-American rhetorical tradition in light of its African influences and origins, and Asante articulates a specifically African conceptualization of rhetoric that focuses on the traditional African concept of *Nommo*, the power of the word.

In these early writings, Asante acknowledges the difficulties of speaking of an distinctively "African" culture: "When we speak of Africans we are talking about a multitude of attitudes, peoples, and philosophies, and in this circumstance to speak of an African mind is to speak foolishly. Thus, we must speak broadly of traditional African society" (p. 367). In doing so, Asante outlines characteristics peculiar to traditional African culture that distinguish it from American ways. The conception of African philosophy articulated by Asante in his early work emerges later in *Afrocentricity* in the notion of *Njia*, which highlights the emphasis on spirituality in African ways and materiality in American ways. Asante grounds *Njia* in the power of the word: "All things that are, exist through speech. Without speech there is Nothing" (p. 109). This grounding has its roots in the traditional African conceptualization of *Nommo*, "the power of the word." Jahn's (1979) explication of the concept illustrates its synthesis of the word with the world, both human and divine. In *Muntu, the New African Culture*, Jahn revisits Griaule's (1980) discussions with the Dogon sage Ogotem-mêli, whose cosmological explanations of existence illustrate the complementary relationship that exists between God and "Muntu," or human beings.

Jahn's discussion of *Nommo* provides an important foundation for the work of Asante and numerous other African-American rhetorical scholars, and illustrates the conceptualization of language that Asante argues is a distinguishing factor in African-American oratory and in the Afrocentric perspective in general. The power of the word shapes the social and spiritual world and provides an epistemic and ontological foundation for human existence. As Jahn explains, "*Nommo*, the life force, is the fluid as such, a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving



life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything" (p. 124). Traditional African ways of knowing and being, according to Jahn's analysis, focus on complementarity as a guiding principle of reality.<sup>5</sup> These characteristics are central to the juxtaposition of what is essentially African and what is essentially American. The complementary and integrative aspects of traditional African philosophy, as a ground for Afrocentricity, are contrasted with the materialistic and divisive tendencies of Eurocentric thought and their influences on American culture. The Afrocentric conceptualization of *nommo*, the word as generative, is contrasted with the utilitarian and pragmatic dimensions of traditional Western rhetoric with its emphasis on persuasion and argument.

The contrast, however, is problematized by the very concept of *nommo*, which while purportedly African is clearly rooted in Eurocentric perspectives on African culture. *Nommo* is an aspect of *one* African culture seen, to use Asante's phrase, "whitely through a tunnel lit with the artificial beams of Europe" (1989, p. 1). Its influence on African-American rhetorical and literary studies is primarily derived not from the works of African philosophers, but from European philosophers sympathetic to Africa. The writings of Marcel Griaule, Janheinz Jahn and Placide Tempels were key sources in the development and articulation of the understanding of African philosophy that undergirds Afrocentric thought in its early manifestations. While African philosophers such as Mbiti (1970) view the contributions of these writers as important to an understanding of African thought and culture, others view their works less favorably. Hountondji (1983), for example, argues that these and other European scholars have caused African philosophical studies to become "bogged down in the muddy paths of a dubious ethnophilosophy" that confuses and collapses the concerns of ethnography with those of philosophy.

Hountondji's analysis points to the complicity of African scholars in the perpetuation of this confusion, both through a lack of acknowledgment of its Eurocentric roots and by an acceptance of the underlying assumptions of Western intellectual traditions. His analysis has important implications for the critique of the Afrocentric position, and like Appiah's, it raises particularly potent concerns which suggest the difficulty of legitimately separating the Afrocentric from the Eurocentric:

For Europe has never expected anything from us, in cultural terms, except that we should offer her our civilizations as showpieces and alienate ourselves in a fictitious dialogue with her, over the heads of our own peoples. That is what we are invited to do whenever we are asked to develop African Studies to preserve our cultural authenticity. We forget too easily that African studies were invented by Europe and that the ethnographic sciences are an integral part of the heritage of Europe, amounting to no more than a passing episode in the theoretical tradition of Western peoples. (1993, p. 52)

Like Appiah, Hountondji suggests that the articulation of a distinctly African cultural identity is problematized by the fact that it cannot be

separated from its Eurocentric elements and influences. He argues that the challenge for African philosophy, like the challenge for Afrocentricity, is in its implementation, its articulation to and for *all* peoples. The extent to which this challenge has been met by proponents of Afrocentricity can be explored through a consideration of the values it has derived from the African-American experience.

*Afrocentricity: An African-American Dilemma*

The extent to which Afrocentricity is representative of values derived from African-American culture is as much the subject of debate as its status as a philosophy illustrative of an African ethos clearly distinct from Eurocentric influences. The debate in the African-American intellectual community indicates that there is no clear consensus on either the value or validity of the Afrocentric perspective: "Scholars in black studies differ on what Afrocentricity means, and whether it should be the main theory pursued by black studies or just one of a variety of theories" (Magner, 1991, p. A 13). Its proponents do tend to agree that Afrocentricity is a viable alternative to the hegemony of Eurocentric social and educational influences, and a legitimate theoretical foundation for the establishment of a democratic and inclusive social praxis. "The struggle against racism on all fronts has propelled the African-American community into the role of crucible for the expansion of democratic rights for all citizens and residents, irrespective of race, class, able-bodiedness or cultural background," notes Early. "Afrocentricism, then, is an objective response, a democratic thrust attempting to overcome the monopoly of Eurocentric values, history and mythology over the lives of all people in the African diaspora" (quoted in Petrie, 1991, p. 24). Although its proponents see Afrocentricity as a legitimate response to the historical omissions and distortions of Eurocentric culture and education, some of its opponents from within the African-American community see it as an attempt to replace one illegitimate discourse with another.

Morgan (1992), for example, argues that "Afrocentrism plays fast and loose with the facts and is not a program designed to correct historical inaccuracies and omissions. Students are asked to toss history aside, to forget archeological and linguistic facts, so they can join a witch hunt for evil white males" (p. 11A). Morgan suggests that writings of Afrocentric proponents often subscribe to the same racial essentialism they purportedly call into question and offer little more than a reversal of the binary oppositions attributed to Eurocentric thought. The results of this reversal, he suggests, are at best simplistic thinking and at worst prejudice and paranoia: "They offer a world simple and polar: good/bad, black/white. Many blacks are beginning to believe in conspiracy theories; what passes for pride is nothing more than bigotry and insecurity" (p. 11A). Morgan recounts how he was labeled a "traitor" for criticizing the views of Jeffries, whose academic

work he believes "cheats the very people he claims he wants to help" (p. 11A). Morgan's critique of Afrocentrism illustrates both the difficulty of defining particular "values" represented by the perspective in the African-American community, and the problems associated with the assumption that such a homogeneous community exists.

A recent debate on the subject confirms the existence of these difficulties and problems. Collins and Hopkins (1993) argue that Afrocentricity neither reflects nor influences the values of either the African-American community in particular or American society in general, but instead reflects and is influenced by a commitment to "a profit motive driven by mainstream capitalism." Collins and Hopkins argue that the African-American community, "by virtue of its silence," opposes Afrocentricity, and that the Afrocentric perspective cannot claim representative status in the community in the light of the diverse perspectives contained within black culture: "Its current proponents would like to foster the assumption that Afrocentrism is *the* 'Black perspective' when, in fact, there are a plurality of Black perspectives on any given sociopolitical issue that confronts the African American community today" (p. 24). Like Morgan, Collins and Hopkins also argue that Afrocentricity reifies the same oppressive and exclusionary tendencies it condemns in Eurocentricity. They point to Afrocentric criticisms of conservative African-American scholars to suggest that "Afrocentrists are setting the stage for the African American community to trade one orthodoxy for another" (p. 25). They see the debate over the value of Afrocentricity as a "fight for control of African American thought," and reflect some of the views of Afrocentricity's opponents within the African-American community.

Proponents of Afrocentricity argue that Collins and Hopkins' critique is not based on a thoughtful understanding of Afrocentricity, is not representative of the African-American community, and is not appreciative of the positive aspects of the perspective. Steplight Johnson (1993, p. 9) contends that Collins and Hopkins "pathetically fail to substantiate their ramblings with thoughtful analysis, data or reference to a review of literature." Their criticism, she suggests, is based upon a series of anecdotal and unsupported claims that she indicts for lack of substantive evidence. Bryant (1993) argues that "the writers assume that they represent the voice of the majority of Africans living in America. In actuality, the writers are merely positing a singular, narrow view" (p. 9). Afrocentricity, she argues is not aimed at the control of African-American thought, but at articulating "the truth" (p. 10). Phillips (1993) takes the position that Collins and Hopkins "do not understand the concept of Afrocentricity." He argues that Afrocentricity is a positive statement of African culture and identity and the values they embody. "Afrocentricity is not anti anything or anyone, it is pro-African/African American. Spirituality and love are key elements; if some people oppose this, too bad!" Phillips also "condemns" Collins

and Hopkins "for such poorly researched, poorly documented and inaccurate journalism" (1993, p. 10). While this exchange may not settle the question concerning which perspective on Afrocentricity is "right" and which is "wrong," it does illustrate the difficulty of suggesting that the perspective is representative of a clearly defined set of values inherent in the African-American "community."

One value that *is* shared by both proponents and opponents of Afrocentricity is its role in determining the "truth" of the perspective in terms of its validity for African-Americans in particular, and multicultural education in general. Proponents of Afrocentricity stress its positive contribution to the affirmation of African culture and black identity. Hilliard III affirms the Afrocentric claim that "[t]he truth has yet to be told about Africa and its descendants world wide," and he suggests that the telling of this truth is a prerequisite for multicultural education to have a positive effect on African-Americans: "The primary goal of curriculum change is to tell the truth, the whole truth. A truthful self- and group-image is a necessity for any people. No ethnic group can function appropriately with false images of itself" (quoted in Petrie, 1991, p. 23). Opponents, like Morgan, agree in principle on the importance of truth, but argue that Afrocentricity does not contribute to it: "Educators must be committed to the truth. And the truth is sometimes ugly and unflattering. This is exactly what Afrocentrism fails to teach" (1992, 1991, p. 11A). While both proponents and opponents of the Afrocentric view agree on the need for "truth," neither side seems able to attain it; perhaps an understanding of the epistemological assumptions inherent in this agreement can help move beyond the discourse of negative difference that presently circumscribes this debate and undermines the potential contribution that Afrocentricity can make to multicultural education.

#### From Complicity to Coherence: Afrocentricity as Multiculturalism

Returning to Asante's depiction of Afrocentricity in terms of its "essential grounds" provides a starting point for explicating the epistemological underpinnings of the Afrocentricity debate. At the pragmatic level each of these grounds give rise to argumentative conflicts that constrain the discussion of Afrocentricity to the limited possibilities of essentialist judgment: there either *is* or *is not* a distinctly African culture, which *can* or *cannot* be separated from Eurocentric influences, and which *does* or *does not* reflect identifiable African-American values. Underlying the pragmatics of these judgments, however, is an agreement by both opponents and proponents that their positions are in fact separate and distinct, and can be understood and resolved in terms of some singular *essential* truth. There is little attempt to consider how the positions might be complementary and how an emphasis on the common grounds of Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity might lead to resolution of the debate that allows for what Appiah (1993) recognizes

as "a new understanding that humanizes all of us by learning to think beyond race" (p. 25).

This, I believe, is the most *essential* ground of the Afrocentric perspective: the recognition of complementarity as the foundation of human thought and action. What is called for is a conceptualization of essence, however, that transcends that subscribed to by Asante in his delineation of Afrocentricity's "essential grounds" in terms of a distinctively African cultural identity. Asante's depictions of both culture and identity reflect an acceptance of essentialism that, despite *theoretical* claims to the contrary, often reifies *in practice* the emphasis on negative differences and its corresponding depiction of human beings in terms of separate and distinct races. The complicity of Afrocentricity is reflected in its acceptance of that which is depicted as "peculiarly" Eurocentric: the tendency to divide the world in terms of binary oppositions and *a priori* differences that are accepted as self evident truths and reflections of an essential reality of fixed and unchanging identities. The movement beyond this complicity can be accomplished, I believe, by a shift of emphasis that recognizes the essential *coherence* of human thought, language, and action that transcends differences of identity and culture.

Coherence emphasizes interdependence and complementarity, and in its Western philosophical conceptualization posits "a being for whom all truths are evident, but also, that each of us is identical with that being, and therefore with each other" (Chisholm, 1966, p. 113).<sup>6</sup> Epistemological coherence has been offered as an alternative to the very foundationism in Eurocentric thought which Afrocentricists deem problematic, and has been conceptualized in rhetorical terms as a complement to, and synthesis of, the positions offered by Afrocentric scholars and African philosophers.<sup>7</sup> This depiction of coherence is consistent with Mbiti's (1970) description of traditional African thought's emphasis on the underlying unity of human diversity: "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the group happens to the individual" explains Mbiti. "The individual can only say: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man" (p. 141). Coherence offers an epistemological approach that transcends distinctions between the Afrocentric and the Eurocentric, and offers a viable alternative to the negative differences that characterize essentialist thought and action.

Methodologically, coherence invites a focus on the common grounds that bind seemingly contradictory positions, so that we might more effectively understand and address the social construction of difference. In the Afrocentricity debate, a coherent analysis allows for a candid acknowledgment of the complicitous acceptance of essentialism that undermines the positions of both proponents and opponents of the perspective. The decision to view Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity as

separate and distinct undermines the potential for understanding what the two world views have to offer each other, and the extent to which they might be viewed as complementary as well as mutually exclusive.<sup>8</sup> Coherence facilitates the goals of Afrocentricity by emphasizing methodological and epistemic flexibility, and by focusing on similarities as well as differences: It privileges no one position at the expense of others *because it begins with the assumption that all positions are interrelated and interdependent*. It synthesizes the Afrocentric understanding of the generative nature of language with the Western recognition of the epistemic function of rhetoric to illustrate how the terms we use to construct social reality have both symbolic and social consequences.

Symbolically, the consequences of essentialist terms emerge in our reliance upon argumentative language to address problems of cultural identity and racial difference. The recognition by Afrocentric thinkers of the generative power of language raises an important question: *If language constructs reality, then what type of reality does a language of argument and criticism create?* Traditionally we have assumed that the negative differences of race, class, and gender that divide human beings are the reflection of some essential reality separate and distinct from us, and we have been content to situate the causes of oppression in institutional and attitudinal structures. We have been less willing to consider how the language with which we discuss these differences somehow perpetuates and reifies them, how the arguments that we advance against the oppressor perpetuate oppression. Because we and the positions we advance are privileged by these linguistic strategies, we are reluctant to see them as constitutive of the very oppression we wish to call into question; nonetheless, as the Afrocentricity debate shows, they offer little more than a reproduction of the black and white judgments of the very essentialist thought by which all of us, black and white, suffer the negative divisions of identity and culture.

Those divisions reflect the social consequences of essentialism, and it is here that the problems and possibilities of Afrocentricity are most clearly brought into focus. As the symbolic implications of the debate suggest, the problems of Afrocentricity begin with its attempt to refute Eurocentricity on its own terms, in terms of mutual exclusivities and binary oppositions, and end with the contradictions that arise out of its adherence to a racial essentialism. Additionally, the Afrocentric perspective is questioned not only by Eurocentric scholars, but by African and African-American scholars as well. While Afrocentrists might dismiss these questions as evidence of the hegemony of Eurocentricity's "miseducation of the African mind," they cannot do so without resorting to a problematical politics of identity that gives to *Afrocentricists and Afrocentricists only* the final say in who can and cannot be Afrocentric. This is ultimately the same racial essentialism to which Afrocentricity

is supposed to offer an alternative, the same hegemony appealed to by Plato and Socrates to legitimate the rule of the many by the few who know the truth.

To the extent that it challenges this hegemony, Afrocentricity offers important possibilities for transforming the social and intellectual contexts which, from Socrates to South Africa, have undermined democratic and multicultural impulses. This might be accomplished, by Afrocentric scholars and African philosophers alike, by emphasizing the positive aspects of the relationship between Africans and Europeans. Thus, instead of rejecting out of hand the writings of European scholars as "ethnophilosophies" as Hountondji (1983) would do, we might acknowledge the importance of those works on the development of Afrocentric thought in general, and the early works of Asante in particular. In "The Markings of an African Concept of Rhetoric," Asante (Smith, 1972) establishes what I believe are the essential grounds of an Afrocentric paradigm that synthesizes African and European philosophical concerns into a powerfully transformative perspective:

African society is essentially a society of harmonies, inasmuch as the coherence or compatibility of persons, things, and modalities is at the root of traditional African philosophy. Several scholars have commented on the nature of traditional African law as being concerned with the restoration of equilibrium. In customary African law not establishment of guilt but rather the smooth and peaceful running of the community is the primary consideration. In fact, Adesanya, a Nigerian writer, declares "this is not simply a coherence of fact or faith, nor of reason and traditional beliefs, but a coherence of compatibility among all disciplines." The concentration of everything exists so tightly that to subtract one item is to paralyze the system. (1972, pp. 367-368)

Adesanya's conception of coherence, like the Western philosophical notion, is grounded in the recognition of systemic interdependence and interrelatedness that allows for compatibility between fact and faith, between belief and reason, between philosophy and ethnophilosophy, and perhaps even between Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity.

The theoretical impulse behind coherence is the transcending of symbolically, intellectually, and socially constructed barriers in the pursuit of a truly humanizing and inclusive perspective. Its emergence in contemporary Afrocentric thought is perhaps most clearly seen in Jean's (1993) *Behind the Eurocentric Veils: The Search for African Realities*, which exemplifies what Appiah (1993) describes as "a benevolent and generous Afrocentrism" (p. 25). It is also evident in the integrative approach offered by Collins' (1990) Afrocentric feminist epistemology which attempts to synthesize the concerns of African-American and white feminists through the coherence of dialogue. Collins offers an important insight that can be usefully applied to the problematic epistemological grounds of argumentative discourse as they emerge in the Afrocentricity debate: "If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge

claims validated under the dominant model become suspect," she explains. "An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth" (p. 219). Perhaps our validation of the truth of Afrocentricity calls for an epistemological paradigm that, though consistent with its underlying assumptions, has not yet been explicitly explored.

Coherence, in providing such a paradigm, also offers an important contribution to the debate on multiculturalism. Like the Afrocentricity debate, the debate over the value of multicultural education is framed by the same essentialist assumptions and argumentative practices. Yet the impetus behind multiculturalism, like that behind Afrocentricity, calls for moving beyond the constraints created by this epistemic frame to, in Asante's words, "allow the full participation of all ethnic groups in a quest for a usable curriculum" (1991a, p. 272) and "make America flourish as it ought to flourish" (1991b, p. 179). It is an impetus to move beyond the dialectical oppositions of essentialist argument to the dialogical syntheses of coherent understanding, to facilitate an approach to knowledge that allows not only for the reception of accepted "truths" but also the critique of the basic assumptions that underlie them. Coherence, as theory and method, complements the aims of multiculturalism. Banks (1993) explains: "A multicultural classroom is a forum of multiple voices and perspectives. The voices of the teacher, of the textbook, of mainstream and transformative authors—and of students—are important components of classroom discourse" (p. 12). Through its emphasis on the interrelatedness of these voices and perspectives, coherence provides a vehicle for moving beyond those antagonistic judgments of essentialist discourse that undermine the articulation of an inclusive and multicultural system of education.

The significance of coherence for Afrocentricity begins with its epistemological assumptions. Offered as an alternative to the dominant theories of knowledge in Western thought, foundationism and externalism, coherence articulates a conceptualization of knowledge that embraces a contextual understanding of the justification of what we accept to be true. In doing so, it acknowledges the role of subjective conviction in the epistemic process, and avoids the tendency to essentialize truth that is often a consequence of the appeal to basic beliefs. Both foundationism and externalism are premised upon such appeals: the first to intuited beliefs (i.e., self-evidence), and the second to naturalized beliefs (i.e., causality). Coherence acknowledges the importance of both types of belief in the determination of knowledge but privileges neither; instead, it posits that epistemic justification is ultimately determined by what Lehrer describes as "the correct blend of subjective acceptance and truth in what is accepted, the right match between mind and reality" (1990, p. 15). The appreciation of subjective conviction



tion, which both foundationist and externalist theories eschew, is a central feature of coherentism. As Lehrer explains:

The soul of the theory is personal acceptance. This is entirely an internal matter. One is personally justified in accepting something because what one accepts informs one that such acceptance is a trustworthy guide to truth. Even the conclusions that one accepts from perception and inference must cohere with one's background information articulated in an acceptance system to insure that they are trustworthy. (1990, p. 150)

Coherence interrogates the traditional epistemological divisions between objectivity and subjectivity in a manner that articulates nicely with Afrocentricity, which according to Asante (1994) is "an orientation to data." "There are certain data and facts which may be used by Afrocentrists in making analyses, but the principle component of the theoretical piece has to do with an orientation, a location, a position," Asante explains, further noting that "Afrocentricity is a perspective which allows Africans to be subjects of historical experience rather than objects on the fringes of Europe" (p. 2, emphasis in original). The Afrocentric affirmation of concrete personal experience parallels the coherentist emphasis on personal acceptance as the final arbitrator of justified true belief, and in principle subscribes to the same epistemological assumptions and convictions.

Asante's Afrocentricity further reflects a coherentist orientation in terms of its conceptualization of communication:

All communication begins with the self. The basis of any general view of communication in society, regardless of the particular emphasis—mass, interpersonal, rhetorical, intercultural, or organizational—is the degree to which the individual has minimized his or her message contradictions. (1994, p. 182)

Asante's conceptualization of communication, like coherentism, calls for the minimizing of inconsistencies to achieve an accurate connection between the subjectivity of mind and materiality of empirically verifiable experience, between theory and practice. Making the connection between theory and practice results, for Asante, in an Afrocentrically oriented "communication person": "Put simply, the communication person, as reflected in the best thinking of the age, is now closer to the African than at any other time in history. This is because of the congruence of African society with the demands of a person's inner-self for harmony" (1994, pp. 183–4). Communication persons are "instruments of the natural harmony" (p. 184), striving toward coherence between self and others, individuality and collectivity, theory and practice.

An integration of the holistic concerns of coherentism with the inclusive impulses of Afrocentric communication yields the possibility of *rhetorical coherence*, a capacity for integrating diverse conceptions of reality. However, the epistemological complicity of Afrocentricity articulated by Asante, as illustrated above, undermines the achievement of rhetorical coherence precisely because of a lack of integration between

the theoretical and the practical. Asante's description of the "new perspective" that Afrocentricity offers illustrates this lack of integration:

Our theoretical view *must not* emphasize the Western conflict view, but the more humanistic voice which is based on harmony. It is *not* the tradition of African societies to see conflict as a method of progress; in fact, societies are made livable and kept that way by removing and keeping out conflict as much as possible. (1994, p. 184, italics added)

Asante's dichotomous construction of the West and Africa, of harmony and conflict, exemplifies the very essentializing tendencies that Afrocentricity calls into question. His unwillingness to see the two as implicated in each other perpetuates the binary logic of foundationism and emphasizes essential differences over the coherent and complementary impulses of Afrocentricity.

This rupture between theory and practice ultimately undermines the transformative potential of the Afrocentric ideal. "Unfortunately, some of Asante's writings give the impression that he is indeed a dichotomous model. He writes about multiculturalism, but his examples are most often Black and White," explains Dickerson (1995). "Despite the fact that his more recent writings and interviews have a broader perspective, Asante's works still mostly revolve around a dichotomous model which renders the theory vulnerable to attack from educational imperialists *and* multiculturalists" (p. 207). The critique of Afrocentricity from both its "enemies" and "allies" speaks to the deeper epistemological complicity at work in the incoherence between the theoretical assumptions of Asante's model and the critical perspectives he advances which reify racial and argumentative essentialism. Asante's perspective, however, is not the only view of Afrocentricity available, and while he has established the discursive foundations for the theory, others have also offered Afrocentric alternatives that clearly illustrate the need for a recognition of the coherencies that cut across oppositional conceptions of Africa and the West. It is to one of those alternative visions that we now turn.

*Beyond Black and White: Reconstructing Afrocentricity  
by Recognizing Implicature*

Molefi Asante's theory of Afrocentricity offers a potentially powerful vehicle for reconstructing our understanding of the social and symbolic realities of racial difference and disenfranchisement. As Brummett (1994) explains, "Afrocentric criticism is potentially something that a people of *any* race can engage in, by remembering to apply Afrocentric standards when studying an Afrocentric perspective" (p. 148, emphasis in original). The historical record, in terms of both Asante's early influences as well as contemporary proponents of Afrocentric thought, seems to support Brummett's observation. In both the past and the present, Europeans have made important contributions to that body of inquiry known as Afrocentricity. From the contributions of Jahn (1979),

Griaule (1980), and Temples (1949), to those of Herskovits (1941) and Davidson<sup>9</sup> (1969), people of European descent have contributed to the articulation of Afrocentric ideas and ideals. Indeed, Bernal, a contemporary European thinker whose views have been aligned by his critics with Afrocentricity,<sup>9</sup> clearly embraces an Afrocentric orientation. He writes in *Black Athena*:

Interestingly, I find it easier to place myself and my promotion of the Revised Ancient Model in the spectrum of black scholarship than within the academic orthodoxy. I see myself in Carruthers' second class, whom he damns as "Negro intellectuals". I am happy to be in the excellent company of DuBois, Mzrui and the others who, while they do not picture all Ancient Egyptians as resembling today's West Africans, do see Egypt as essentially African. (1987, p. 437)

Although Asante does make reference to Bernal's work, he does not acknowledge it as Afrocentric. That acknowledgement, it seems to me, would go a long way in both setting the historical record straight and validating Afrocentricity as an orientation that is inclusive *in practice* as well as theory. If, as Asante claims, the "true criterion, then, is not color but Afrocentricity" (1989, p. 64), then the contributions of Europeans to Afrocentricity need to be acknowledged. Similarly, the coherencies that cut across African and European thought that exemplify how they are implicated in each other must also be addressed.

Perhaps more than any other contemporary scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has successfully addressed these coherencies. Gates is described by Asante on one hand as a critic of Afrocentricity's "cultural chauvenism" and "racial separatism," and on the other as a writer whose work has "elements of centered locations" (1994, pp. 4, 111). This double consciousness that characterizes Gates's response to Afrocentricity is largely influenced by his reaction to its commitment to racial essentialism, a commitment that he argues emerged in, and undermined, critical orientations toward black literature that surfaced in the latter part of this century. These theories reflected many of the same concerns of Afrocentricity, calling into question the legitimacy of Eurocentric criticism of African American artistic values and practices, and positing the existence of a uniquely African centered sensibility that defined black art on its own terms. Termed "race and superstructure" critics by Gates, proponents of such theories also subscribed to an essentialized conception of identity that placed "Blackness" at the center of aesthetic and literary judgment: "What's wrong with employing race and superstructure as a critical premise? This theory of criticism sees language and literature as a reflection of 'Blackness.' It postulates 'Blackness' as an entity, rather than a metaphor or sign," explains Gates (1987, p. 39). By advancing such notions of "Blackness," Gates argues, critics confuse "critical thought" with "the thought criticized." The result is an essentializing of identity: "Only a black man, therefore, can think (hence, rethink) a black thought. Consciousness is predetermined by culture and color" (p. 39).

For Gates, the socially constructed and negotiated character of literature, culture, and consciousness is obscured and undermined by the rigid ideological commitment to an uninterrogated essence, an idea forced into a form. "Literary images, even black ones, are combinations of words, not of absolute or fixed things. The tendency of black criticism toward an ideological absolutism, with its attendant inquisition, had to come to an end" (p. 41). Gates emerged as one of the major critics of race and superstructure in African American literary criticism, rendering a "critique of blackness as a transcendent signified in order to help break through the enclosure of negation" (p. 54). The result is an orientation that is both theoretically and critically inclusive, that contextualizes African American literature and addresses its implicature as well as its unique identity. "The challenge of the critic of comparative black literature is to inform his or her readings of discrete black texts but also to generate his or her own theories from the black idiom" (p. 58). Gates calls for a finding and exploring of the common grounds that connect African and European aesthetic traditions, so that both may benefit from each other. He sees in the notion of "Signifying" the transformative possibility and reconstructive potential of an inclusive and coherent critical perspective and practice.

Brummett (1992) sees signifying as "a third important tenet of Afrocentricity" and focuses on it as "a strategy of indirection. It is saying or doing one thing while meaning another, with the full knowledge that one's audience will understand the doubleness or two-facedness of what one says and does" (p. 150). He notes that signifying is, for Gates, "a practice present in all African cultures and rooted in the mythic figure of 'Esu,' or the trickster," and "a strategy for obscuring appropriate to one's own culture" (Brummett, 1992, p. 151). It allows for affirmation of one's identity and cultural transformation through discursive reconstruction instead of rhetorical rejection. It is Afrocentric in sentiment but resists racial reductionism, and represents as Gresson (1995) suggests, "an African American rhetorical strategy, traceable to African origins, that embodies the pluralistic imperative" (p. 189). Gresson describes Gates as "the leader of a new intergrationist spirit," whose theoretical project "accomplished what even Martin Luther King, Jr., had failed to do: 'integrate' Blacks and whites beneath a common generic vision" (p. 190). Although Gresson, like Asante, resists categorizing Gates's work as "Afrocentric," he nonetheless acknowledges its transformative power: "the central and brilliant feature of Gates's effort inheres in his integration of various myths, theories, criticisms, and scholarly efforts into a *critical recovery of epic*" (p. 199, emphasis in original). I submit that Gates's theoretical project also represents a rereading of Afrocentricity that recovers its commitment to inclusivity, coherence, and complementarity in a manner that successfully resists essentialism, and thus establishes the foundations for a multicultural Afrocentricity.

### Conclusion: Coherence as the Challenge of a Multicultural Afrocentricity

Even as he acknowledges its transformative possibilities, Gresson also recognizes the tension between Gates's project and Afrocentricity, and he points to the paradoxical relationship between the two:

Ironically, the criticism now beleaguering Gates is precisely the criticism that prepared the way for his emergence as a race and culture hero: that is, an Afrocentric stance—which emerged following the revolutionary 1960s—toward white scholarship, particularly as it relates to Blacks and other perceived victims of Western cultural and political imperialism. Scholars writing within the parameters of Afrocentrism understood and incorporated aspects of the critical theory underpinning deconstructionism. They rarely write or relate, however, from within the discursive communities variously described with deconstructionism. (1995, p. 189)

Gresson here notes the rupture between Gates's willingness to embrace and acknowledge how Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity are implicated in each other, and the resistance to recognizing this implicature exhibited on both sides of the color line. He reads Gates' project as a "recovery narrative," advanced to justify both his own unwillingness to subscribe to—and his willingness to critique—the hegemonic notion of "blackness" assumed by Afrocentricity.

Gresson reads Gates as "validating yet negating the passion of the Afrocentric vision," and asserts that Gates "surrenders to the white literary tradition. He yields to hegemony; he replaces Black within, beneath, and under white; and he raises this action, this decidedly pragmatic gesture to a theoretical or abstract level" (p. 198). Gresson's analysis of Gates' work and life is ambivalent, if not paradoxical. In one sense he seems to praise him for his integrative vision, but in another he sees the vision as problematic: "Gates has woven a view of Black life drained of the racial violence and pain. This is the deconstruction, and this is why his book and he, to the degree that it is his own narrative, are flawed and without evidence of dialectical enlargement" (p. 204). I submit that even if Gates' work is without "dialectical enlargement," it is nonetheless filled with the possibility of "dialogical enlargement," and thus offers a productive and potentially transformative vision for the reconstruction of race in America. Such a reconstruction is ultimately reflected in the emancipatory objectives of both multiculturalism and Afrocentricity.

Thus, the challenge of implementation for multiculturalism is the same as the challenge of implementation for Afrocentricity: articulating an epistemological frame of reference that will transform the essentializing tendencies of both intellectual and social realities. Such a frame could result in an *integrative Afrocentricity* which is committed both to an understanding of Africa's role in postmodern history and a recognition of what African thought and culture, in its many manifestations, can contribute to the thoughtful transformation of modernism. Certainly, Afrocentricists have provided a powerful critique of the

shortcomings of enlightenment rationalism and realism, and have offered a compelling indictment of the consequences of the underlying essentialism that has dominated Western social and intellectual theory and practice. However, they also have done more. "The Afrocentric idea is one way of revealing the multicultural essence of our effort to understand the human experience," writes Jeffrey Woodyard. "An elevation of African-centered approaches to the reflection and study of phenomena in a multiplicity of settings advances our knowledge and understanding of African Americans' responses to life" (p. 43). Woodyard acknowledges the significant contribution that Afrocentric thought has made to our recognition of alternative epistemological and conceptual frames, and the importance of African centered contributions to an enlarged understanding of human thought and history.

These contributions are overshadowed, however, when proponents of Afrocentricity subscribe to the same principles and practices they call into question: ironically, arguments over Afrocentricity and multiculturalism are often the clearest example of this epistemological complicity. Asante's "exchange" with Diane Ravitch exemplifies this tendency, for there is no attempt by either scholar to find some common ground between the two positions: there is only an agreement to disagree. Beyond the agreement to disagree, there is the possibility of exploring the coherencies that cut across both positions, those which bind them together. Ravitch (1991) argues, for example, that her exchange with Asante is grounded in "a disagreement about the meaning of truth and how it is ascertained," and she then accuses Afrocentricists alternatively of racial essentialism and historical relativism. She rejects both positions and argues that knowledge must be constantly challenged and revised: "Reason and intelligence, not skin color and emotion, must be the ultimate arbiters of dispute over fact" (p. 276).

Ravitch's inability to recognize that the terms she chooses are grounded in the same epistemological assumptions she rejects, and that the binary oppositions she uses reflect the very problematic that is at the heart of the Afrocentric critique of Western thought, powerfully illustrates the problematic complicity of argumentative thought and discourse. The opposition of "reason and intelligence" to "skin color and emotion" is an argumentative move characteristic of the rhetoric of racism that reflects relative values taken to be absolute, and the belief that there are "ultimate arbiters" of "fact" is an acceptance of the very "fundamentalist" position she claims to reject. Ravitch seems unable or unwilling to consider the consequences of framing an exchange in terms of mutually exclusive and incompatible positions, and the same observation applies to the perspectives advanced by many Afrocentrists. The challenge of implementation for Afrocentricity, if it is to be multicultural in theory as well as practice, demands a candid acknowledgment of this epistemological complicity and its social and cultural consequences.

Dei (1997) explicates this connection between Afrocentricity and an inclusive curriculum by candidly acknowledging its contradictions as well. In his examination of Afrocentric education in the Euro-Canadian context, he offers an analysis that praises the Afrocentric imperative yet at the same time carefully considers its limitations: "The implications of an Afrocentric curriculum for whites and other nonblack minority students is cultivating the knowledge that the interrogation of multiple ways of knowing contribute to enrich learning," he explains. "It is not simply a question of a dichotomy between Afrocentric teachings and Eurocentric teachings but rather how each knowledge form can and does borrow from the other" (p. 218). Echoing Gates, Dei contends that an Afrocentric agenda that limits itself to self-referential conceptions of race and culture "can be self defeating," and suggests that "Afrocentrists must seek to construct an alliance with other critical theorists and pedagogues and to articulate an emancipatory pedagogy relevant to all students" (p. 218). According to Dei, the tendency to romanticize and mythologize Africa, and to situate Afrocentricity within the context of an essentialist oppositionality that reifies racial difference, only undermines its emancipatory potential. "The strength of Afrocentric education lies in its liberatory potential," he concludes, "while at the same time recognizing that Afrocentric education does not call for the negation of European influence on African peoples (scholarship and culture), nor does it call for African peoples to separate from nonblack cultures" (p. 219).

Dei's (1997) analysis clearly indicates that a multicultural Afrocentricity must do more than simply replace one centrism or cannon with another in a dialectical exchange that perpetuates the very hegemonic negativity that created the need for Afrocentric and multicultural discourse in the first place. In order to meet the challenge of implementation, a multicultural Afrocentricity must not only establish a theory based upon coexistence and cooperation, but must also translate that theory into a *praxis* that reconceptualizes the intellectual and linguistic strategies that define and constrain our symbolic and social interactions. It must pursue what West (1993) describes as a *politics of conversion*<sup>11</sup> in order to avoid being reduced to a politics of identity. It must move beyond the complicity of essentialist argument to the coherence of integrative discourse. Such a movement represents a paradigmatic evolution that demands a re-cognition of our most basic beliefs, assumptions, and practices, and challenges us to consider the consequences of placing any singular perspective at the center of our being. It invites us to meet the challenge of implementation that faces both Afrocentricity and multiculturalism by integrating the best elements of the two so that a holistic dialogue of human commonality might be awakened and the hegemonic dialectic of racial difference put to rest.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Crapanzano's (1985) depiction of essentialism illustrates at the epistemological level its assumptions and implications. "In this view, once an object or being is classified, it is forever that object or being. It has an identity. It partakes of a particular essence." Crapanzano also points to the social and political consequences of essentialism for human action and interaction. "When applied to human beings, essentialist thought precludes that small space of freedom that is at the heart of humanity and enables us to engage in a vital manner with those about us" (p. 20).

<sup>2</sup>A 1993 Speech Communication Association convention panel offered several analyses of how complicity with oppression emerges in the discipline. Barry Brummett, Celeste Condit, Frank Dance, and W. Lance Haynes considered how the scholarship and politics of discourse have led to such complicity in the realms of rhetorical theory, feminism, organizational concerns in the discipline, and literacy.

<sup>3</sup>Jeffries provides perhaps the most extreme view on the essential differences that separate Africans and their descendants from Europeans and theirs in his depiction of blacks as "sun" people and whites as "ice" people. Jeffries was dismissed from his position as chairman of the department of black studies at the City College of New York, but was reelected by Judge Kenneth Conboy. "The judge acknowledged that Jeffries had made a 'hateful, poisonous and racist statement' and had behaved in a 'thuggish' way. Nevertheless, Conboy ruled that the trustees of the City University System had violated Jeffries' First Amendment rights when they stripped him of his department chairmanship" (Afrocentrism and Judge Conboys, 1993, p. 12).

<sup>4</sup>The debate over multiculturalism, like the Afrocentricity debate, is fraught with accusations of bad scholarship and bad intentions. See, for example, Chavez's (1990) essay "The real aim of the promoters of cultural diversity is to exclude certain people and to foreclose debate," Hymowitz's (1993) "Multiculturalism is anti-culture" or Perry's (1992) "Why do multiculturalists ignore anthropologists?" For a more positive consideration of the contributions of multiculturalism to scientific inquiry see Frankel's (1993) "Multicultural science: Minority scholars bring key perspectives to research and policy issues."

<sup>5</sup>In "The Quest of an African World View" Sowande (1974) explicates the principle of complementarity in terms of its centrality in African articulations of both linguistic and physical reality. The African, he notes "relates everything that affects him directly or indirectly to what we might call a primal center from which literally everything has originated and to which it is bound to return" (p. 89).

<sup>6</sup>The reference to Chisholm may appear to be misleading since his epistemological commitments are decidedly foundationist, and his depiction of coherence in these terms is offered as a criticism and not an affirmation of the perspective. Nonetheless, his observation is important to our understanding of coherence as an epistemological stance that resists essentialism and notions of truth based upon self evidence. Chisholm (1966) writes that the theory "conflicts, moreover, with Aristotle's basic insight: 'it is not because we think truly that you are pale, that you are pale; it is because you *are* pale that we who say this have the truth.' I cannot feel, therefore, that it is reasonable for anyone to accept the theory. But if we reject the theory, we must find some other way of dealing with the problems it was designed to solve" (p. 133). Those problems, I submit, are revealed in the tendency of foundationism to define truth in essentialist and reductionistic terms.

It is also important to note that there are many different versions of coherentism, some of which are congruent and others contradictory. The aspects of the theory with which I am here concerned, which emerge in some form or another in most types of coherentism, are those which emphasize holism, systematicity, and the resistance to privileging certain types of beliefs over others. Joachim (1906) defines coherence in terms of a "significant whole": "A 'significant whole' is such that all its constituent elements reciprocally involve one another, or reciprocally determine features in a single concrete meaning" (p. 66). Coherence reconciles the distinctions of essentialist conceptions of knowing and being by recognizing their interrelatedness and their contingent nature. Blanshard (1940) also suggests that coherence provides a vehicle for recognizing the



interrelatedness of propositions and indicates its importance for judgment: "The degree of truth of a particular proposition is to be judged in the first instance by its coherence with experience as a whole" (p. 264). Blanshard sees coherence as exemplary of a complementary view of reality that concerns itself with the human capacity to "hold beliefs about the technique of acquiring beliefs" (p. 285). Lehrer (1990) explains that a coherence theory "denies the need for basic beliefs," and claims that a "correct theory of knowledge must provide the right match between mind and reality. A match between mind and world sufficient to yield knowledge rests on coherence with a system of things we accept, our acceptance system, which must include an account, undefeated by error, about how we may succeed in our quest for truth" (p. 18). Lehrer's conception of coherence, because of its acknowledgment of the subjective dimensions of knowing, provides a fertile ground for the conceptualization of rhetorical coherence as an alternative to argumentative essentialism.

<sup>7</sup>I take this position in *The Rhetoric of Racism* (McPhail, 1993) to suggest that a rhetorical conceptualization of coherence offers an actively non-argumentative approach to discourse that focuses on dialogue and the findings of similarity in difference.

<sup>8</sup>Hare, who notes that one of the benefits of the Afrocentricity debate is "that it has helped bring into sharper focus the existence of Eurocentrism," offers a perspective on the debate that reflects a coherent approach: "Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism are ways of looking through a lens at the world . . . The difference between ideological training and education may be the willingness to teach more than one lens" (quoted in Magner, 1991, p. A13).

<sup>9</sup>Asante describes Herskovits (1941), Davidson (1969) along with Thompson (1983), as scholars "who have sought to see through the eyes of Africans" as "pre-Afrocentric" scholars, and proceeds to distinguish between what he considers "authentic" Afrocentric thought and that which is undermined by Eurocentric influences (1994, pp. 4-6). His depiction of European contributors to Afrocentric thought as "pre-Afrocentric" echoes the racist sentiments of European assessments of non-Western people as "pre-literature" or "pre-rational, and his designation of African Americans who do not subscribe to his conception of Afrocentricity as "African American and African Eurocentrists" reflects the notion of an "authentic" blackness that is culturally ideosyncratic and critically problematic. Both descriptions reflect essentialist commitments that undermine his claim that Afrocentricity is an "orientation" by drawing arbitrary and unnecessary distinctions based on the one hand on race, and the other on ideology.

<sup>10</sup>Lefkowitz's (1996) book *Not Out of Africa* is an amplification of her 1992 review essay of the same name, which was about "Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* and its relation to the Afrocentrist movement" (1996, p. xi). Lefkowitz argues that Bernal's analysis is based upon "acceptable (as opposed to warranted) proof." "The best illustration of the popularity of acceptable proof is the success enjoyed by Bernal's multivolume project *Black Athena*, which is one of the few works about the ancient world (other than the Bible) that many modern nonclassicists have heard about, or have even tried to read. Its appeal derives from the cultural correctness of its author's motives: the explicit political purpose of Bernal's project is to "lessen European cultural arrogance. Bernal attempts to show that ancient historians have not acknowledged the full extent of Greece's debt to Egypt and the Near East" (pp. 51-2).

<sup>11</sup>In his *Race Matters* (1993), West illustrates the connection between a politics of conversion and an ethic committed to coherence. Arguing that "nihilism" is at the root of the deterioration of African-American culture and identity, he offers the following prescription: "Like alcoholism and drug addiction, nihilism is a disease of the soul. It can never be completely cured, and there is always the possibility of relapse. But there is always a chance for conversion—the chance for people to believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle. This chance rests neither on an agreement about what justice consists of nor an analysis of how racism, sexism, or class subordination operate. Such arguments and analyses are indispensable. But a politics of conversion requires more. Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analysis; it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. This turning is done

through one's own affirmation of one's worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion" (p. 19).

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