**“Rhetoricians Assemble” Transcript**

[*Rhetoricity* theme plays]

00:11

Eric Detweiler [D]: Hello hello, *Rhetoricity* listeners! This is Eric Detweiler, here to bring you a third episode guest-hosted by Dr. Derek Handley, who I'm delighted to say is here with me as we record this introduction. I put out a call for guest contributors to the podcast back in July 2020. Check on the introduction to the episode entitled "Rhetorical Juxatapositions" if you'd like more information on that call. Derek has previously guest-hosted episodes featuring Drs. Cedric Burrows and April Baker-Bell. This installment ups the ante as he moderates a roundtable featuring Tamika Carey, David Green, Andre Johnson, Ersula Ore, and Gwendolyn Pough, recorded at the 2022 Rhetoric Society of America Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. I'll introduce those guests in a little more detail in a bit, but for now, I want to bring Derek into the conversation. And Derek, I wanted to ask if you could just talk a little bit about the initial inspiration for this episode and how it came together.

Derek Handley [H]: Thanks, Eric. Well, this episode came together, really, in part because of your initial call. In the summer of 2020, I wanted to talk to some scholars about where we were as a discipline, as an academic profession, and maybe even to a lesser extent as a country, two years after the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery. And it happened to coincide with our RSA Conference. And when we met, I mean, it was like not too long after the mass shooting in Buffalo. So I thought it was a timely conversation because what we saw after, you know, the summer of 2020, this big conversation that we were having as a discipline about antiracism, antiracism pedagogy—that was kind of the exigence, if you will, for having this conversation with this wonderful lineup of scholars whose work I've read, I've taught, I just respect the whole heck out of them, and it was a wonderful time for me—some of them who only knew in passing, but I really got to know and got to speak with. So that was the reason for wanting to do this. And I'm just so happy number one to you for allowing me to use your platform again, and especially to the scholars who agreed to participate.

D: Yeah, for sure. I mean, I'm more than happy to share the platform. And I will say, like, I would have never in my wildest dreams have imagined being able to get this group together for this little podcast

H: We gotta give a shout out to Dr. Ersula Ore because I initially approached her, and she came up with the idea, said “I think we should expand it.” And she reached out to everyone on our behalf. So I want to make sure I give her the credit.

D: Yes. And you know, you mentioned there that she had given you the idea to kind of expand the conversation a little bit. The past episodes that you've guest-hosted have been, you know, one-on-one interviews, which most episodes of this podcast are. I was curious, you know, maybe just as like a little teaser or setup for what they're about to hear, you know, is there anything about the fact that this was a roundtable where you had this wide range of perspectives that really jumped out to you as sort of like adding something or being really significant to what this this episode sort of brought to the table for you?

H: Well, a couple of things. Number one, I was very intimidated about the format—having five people. I'm not a professional, by any means, so I was just drawing from previous talk shows I've watched and podcasts I’ve listened to. I think that was the number one thing. But once we got started, I mean, it got to a point where it didn't even feel like there was a microphone. Heard some wonderful stories about their own institutions, about what it's like sometimes to be the only Black scholar in the institution, as well as, you know, things that are not working. I think there are some policies and some things institutions or departments may try to do in good faith, but they're not exactly working. So there was some very enlightening conversation about some of those issues. I think one of many things that listeners can pay attention to is how each of the scholars talk about support: support for faculty of color, but also support of students and how important that is. I think we often focus a lot on research and publications, but for a lot of us, there is a love of teaching and working with students. So I think, you know, listen to how they talk about the support of students. I think that is one key takeaway. So Eric, I have a question for you.

D: Yeah, for sure.

H: What did you envision when you first put out a call in 2020 for scholars to guest host your podcast?

D: Honestly, part of what I was hoping for was that I would get things that I couldn't imagine because as I was putting out that call, the renewed round of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020—and as you mentioned, you know, the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery—were reminders of, you know, the limitations of my own perspective. And I think even in a situation, like a podcast interview, where you can invite multiple voices into the conversation—you know, at the very least the interviewer and the interviewee—there was something about, no matter what, that still being sort of filtered through to a certain extent, you know, my perspective as a white faculty member that felt limiting. [06:30] And so I wanted to provide a little bit more of an opportunity for faculty of color to speak with each other without me sort of like, moderating or feeling like I was, you know, in the pilot seat or whatever metaphor you want to use. So, you know, the fact that this has led to at this point—and the call is still open in perpetuity, but at this point—you know, a couple interviews, like you said, with some really already feel like kind of superstar, but also up-and-coming in a sense, faculty members like Dr. Baker-Bell and Dr. Burrows, and then this roundtable—which I think, you know, adds another cool kind of twist on the format, in terms of the conversation that that happened between you and these other five scholars—is getting right at that, hopefully, what I was hoping would happen here. But a lot of it, you know, to put it shortly, was for me to be able to sort of step away and let other people's voices just drive the conversation a little bit more without the sort of filtration from my own perspective, which is already very, very well represented in academia. So I hope that that has come through in the episodes you've hosted so far, and will on the one today, and if other people want to jump in and are interested in guest hosting going forward, we'll continue on as this podcast rolls on.

H: I think we need to find a way to make that happen, to get other scholars to reach out to you to do this. You know, I would love to hear a roundtable discussion of graduate students. You know, we talked to senior scholars—

D: You heard it here first! I won't I won't put anybody on the hook by name, [H laughs] but if you are a graduate student of color in and around rhetoric and writing studies and are interested in putting together sort of, you know, a panel on the experiences of graduate students of color in the field, send me an email. Let me know. And I would be happy to hand the mic, literally or metaphorically, over to you for an episode.

H: You know, all three episodes that you allowed me to guest host have been wonderful, and I really, really enjoyed the experience. And I want to give you thanks. Because there's no way in heck— [pauses, D laughs] No, let me just say it because I think there's some language in our interview. There's no way in hell I could have done any of this, I think, seeing what goes into putting a podcast together. It is not just work; it is academic work that should be recognized as such. And the work that you're doing—and any of the scholars, there's a lot of wonderful rhetoric podcasts out there, but it is academic work. And I've really enjoyed doing it.

D: I will extend the same appreciation and admiration for the work you've done putting these together back to you, Derek. And you know, I know you use some superhero lingo in all these episodes. So we can see you’ve made your trilogy here, but maybe we'll wait for that post-credit sequence. But thank you for the work you've done so far. And the invitation is open to anybody, but to you, of course, as well if you’ve got one more in the tank that you want to add down the line. So thank you. And with that, I will jump to introducing our panelists here. So as we've discussed, this roundtable includes five panelists in addition to you, Derek, and here they are in alphabetical order. [10:00] First up: Tamika Carey. Dr. Carey is an interdisciplinary scholar and teacher whose work focuses on African American Rhetorics and Literacies, Feminist Rhetorics, Black Women's Writing and Intellectual Traditions, and the memoir. She's the author of *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*, and her essays appear in such venues as *Rhetoric Review*, *enculturation*, *Signs*, *Present Tense*, and *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. She is currently an Associate Professor of English, Faculty Affiliate in the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, and Donchian-Casteen Fellow in the Institute of Practical Ethics and Public Life at the University of Virginia. Next up, David Green. Dr. Green is Associate Professor of English and the Director of First-Year Writing at Howard University. He's the editor of *Visions and Cyphers*, a writing studies textbook composed with an emphasis on culture and language research in composition studies. He's published several articles on race, writing, assessment, and critical language use in such journals as *College English*, *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*, *Changing English*, and *Composition Studies*. His research interests include Hip Hop, African American rhetoric, Writing Assessment, Writing Program Administration, Critical Pedagogy, and Emancipatory Composition studies. After that, we've got to Andre Johnson. Dr. Johnson is Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Media Studies and the Scholar in Residence at the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis. He teaches classes in African American Public Address; Rhetoric, Race, and Religion; Media Studies; Interracial Communication; Rhetoric of Social Movements; and Hip Hop Studies. Dr. Johnson is the author of *No Future in this Country: The Prophetic Pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner* as well as *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition*. He is also the co-author of *The Struggle Over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*. He's a two-time recipient of the Outstanding Book Award from the National Communication Association's African American Communication and Culture Division. He's also the editor of *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality*, and the curator and director of the Henry McNeal Turner Project, a digital archive dedicated to the writings and study of Bishop Turner. That brings us to Ersula Ore. Dr. Ore's research agenda focuses on the suasive strategies of Black Americans and investigates the relationship between physical and discursive violence, citizenship, and race. Professor Ore is the Lincoln Professor of Ethics in the School of Social Transformation and Associate Professor of African & African American studies at Arizona State University. Her book, *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, & American Identity*, which explores American lynching as an ongoing practice of racialized citizenship connected to anti-Black policing, received the 2020 Book Award from the Rhetoric Society of America. And last but not least, Gwendolyn Pough. Dr. Pough is a renowned scholar of feminist theory, African American rhetoric, women’s studies, and hip-hop culture. Her book, *Check It While I Wreck It*, explores the relationship between Black women, hip-hop, and feminism. Dr. Pough is currently the William P. Tolley Distinguished Professor in the Humanities in the College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University. Through that platform, she has helped to shape conversations about pedagogical practices in the classroom with an emphasis on diversity, inclusion, social justice and activism. One last note: This roundtable was recorded right after the awards ceremony at this spring's Rhetoric Society of America conference, and a few of the participants played prominent roles in that ceremony. Dr. Ore presented the awards in her capacity as chair of RSA's awards committee. Dr. Johnson received RSA's Cheryl Geisler Award for Outstanding Mentorship, and Dr. Pough was there to be introduced as RSA's president-elect. In addition to recognizing their service, I also wanted to mention that because a few of the panelists had to join us a few minutes late due to their other responsibilities. So when you hear Derek welcome some new arrivals a couple minutes into the conversation, that's what's going on. And with that, I give you this roundtable, recorded in Baltimore in the summer of 2022.

14:40

[Transition music: “Circle Round” by Spinning Clocks. Droning organ line over pulsing bass and electronic drums.]

H: Hello, I'm Derek G. Handley, Assistant Professor of English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. We'll just go around and I'll have you introduce yourselves, and we'll begin with Andre.

Andre Johnson [J]: Thank you, Derek. My name is Andre Johnson. I am Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Media Studies in the Department of Communication and film at the University of Memphis.

H: Glad you're here, Andre. Tamika.

Tamika Carey [C]: I am Tamika Carey, Associate Professor of English at the University of Virginia, and I work as a cultural rhetorician and a feminist rhetorician.

H: Thank you. David.

David Green [G]: David Green, Jr. I'm an associate professor of English at Howard University and also the director of first-year writing. I also identify as a cultural rhetorician, and maybe hip-hop rhetorician.

H: All right, I just want to say I am so glad you all agreed to do this. This is an honor for me. I'm familiar with your work. And I'm a little bit of a comic book head, so this is kind of, you know, this table is like the Avengers or the Super Friends [others laugh] and I get to have a conversation with you. So I guess with that metaphor in mind, I'm always interested in origin stories and how scholars got to where they are, and so the first question I'm going to ask, and I'm gonna have each of you answer this question is, when did you know in your educational journey that becoming a scholar of rhetoric, communication, writing was a career path that you wanted to pursue? And also whose scholarly and or creative work has influenced you? Let's start with you, Tamika.

16:42

C: Okay, well, I think I stumbled into the field of rhetoric and composition by tragedy, actually. I used to be a professional technical writer. That was my first position after school, and the 9/11 event ended up with me losing my job and deciding to go get my master’s. And at that time, I also started teaching high school, and so that new work introduced me to language politics, and it had me searching for ways to affirm my Black students. And so some of the early thinkers and writers that really helped me find myself was, of course, Geneva Smitherman and Keith Gilyard—those are the two earliest scholars, you know, of rhetoric that I can remember reading and really consuming as a way to celebrate Black vernacular language, Black Vernacular English, AAE—what we're calling this evolving conversation. Eventually, though, it was the work of feminist scholars and womanist scholars like Jacqueline Jones Royster, Gwendolyn Pough, Elaine Richardson, that helped me to cement a critical vocabulary for why classroom spaces are not always as welcoming for Black students. It was that rhetorical work of understanding discourses that disempower that really helped me kind of find, hit the lick of the work that I wanted to do about in terms of thinking about how language constructs reality, and sometimes to disadvantage particular groups, but also in ways that if we study it right, and insist on it being equitable, can allow us to do affirming and healing work.

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H: Was there anyone in this journey that really encouraged you, you know, when you were making this change?

C: I mean, you know, I've been very fortunate to have supportive mentors. I kind of hit the jackpot and in terms of who trained me and my doctoral programs. But beyond that, I think it was that ethic of teaching and just affirming, you know, Black students that keeps me motivated. Yeah.

H: David?

G: I guess my origin story is real similar to Dr. Carey’s. We've talked about this before, I've just never noticed how—I guess certain parts I hadn't connected. But yeah, I think informally, I had been thinking about rhetoric, rhetoric and writing, rhetoric and how we think about issues of racial justice, since undergrad, and a few different kinds of critical theory courses I took as an undergrad that introduced me to certain scholars—namely, Geneva Smitherman. And this is why I say it’s a very similar family tree there. And I was introduced to Geneva Smitherman’s work very early in undergrad, then I went off to teach, and in teaching, you know, all of these questions came about—not just in terms of the material, in terms of how do we get students to kind of write poetry, or how to correct sentences, and so on and so forth, what's going on at a pedagogical level when I'm in front of the classroom. But also, how am I going to help them think about some of the realities that they're experiencing? And at this time, I was teaching in Norfolk, Virginia, very similar to my hometown of Newark, New Jersey. And so I was very aware of some of the different experiences with injustice that the students were experiencing, as well as trying to help them make sense of the different music, the different books, the different magazines that they were reading and consuming, different discourses that they were consuming at that time. So it led me to graduate school, and in graduate school, I met Keith Gilyard, he introduced me formally to the term rhetoric, and formally to the idea of rhetoric and composition as interconnected fields. And then lo and behold there's also connection to Geneva Smitherman. And then in my graduate journey, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Elaine Richardson, who’s also a very, very influential figure on me, just thinking about the academy and also how I wanted to position myself as a speaker, as somebody who uses language. I often joke about this with a friend that I went to graduate school with, but we were in a class with Elaine, Dr. E, and we were talking about code-switching. And she also made the note that not everybody needs to code-switch, and in fact, you know, she was very proud of her ability to use Ebonics within the classroom space. [general laughter] And it really made me think and maybe begin to, you know, question, as mentioned, how language shapes certain realities because for me that was so affirming, as somebody who's, you know, constantly trying to either contour or manicure my speech to fit different environments. It was permission to bring in that vocabulary and that vernacular as a valuable vehicle for my ideas as well.

H: Might have to get the elders on the podcast— [trails off, chuckles]

Ersula Ore [O]: That’d be dope.

J: That’d be real good.

Green: Justice Society.

[laughter]

H: Andre?

J: Well, my origin story is a little bit different. I was bit by this radioactive spider. [H laughs] Too much gamma rays or something. No, listen, I had no idea I was going to be doing what I'm doing right now. I had no clue. I was in seminary, and I was finishing up my last year of seminary at Memphis Theological Seminary. I in that same last year planted a church: Gifts of Life Ministries—still 20 years strong, all that good stuff. And one of the last classes that I took was an Engaging the Powers class by Dr. Barbara Holmes, and really enjoyed the class and it was really great, a great class. But my final paper was on—I took Walter Wink’s theory of every institution has a spirit, and I applied it to the church that I'm currently serving. So I didn't really know what I was doing. I was just doing it and just trying to, you know, finish the paper. But she read it and graded it, you know, and asked me to come to her office and to have a conversation. And this was the time she asked me, “What are you going to do after you finish?” I said, “You know, I’ll just go and pastor, and then, you know, three years later, come back and do a DMin,” doctorate in ministry degree, that's what I was going to be doing. She said, “You should do a PhD.” She was the first person to tell me that I could do a PhD. And I’m like, “Okay. A PhD in what?” “No, you could do a PhD in whatever you want to do it in.” And so I began to start looking around for PhD programs. I thought it was going to be in homiletics or preaching or something like that. I took a year off, served as dean of chapel at Memphis Theological Seminary. So I'm still thinking in that line.

H: Mmhmm.

J: Then all of a sudden, I began to really begin to feel compelled to, “Hey, I need to do this.” So the search got intense, and realizing that I could not leave Memphis at that present time, just with the church and all—the closest homiletics program was Vanderbilt. So, literally, I looked in—I think at that time, I think I did the phonebook first. And then I went online and found University of Memphis, and I looked and said, “Oh, they got a PhD in communication. Hey, my undergrad major was communication. Let me see what this is all about. I can do this.” [25:42] To make a long story short, I call a guy named Campbell, John Campbell. And he was the director of graduate studies at the time, and he invited me to come have a meeting with him. And I just walked in, I said, “Hey, I just, you know, did this MDiv, I didn't even know if I could even come here. But you know, I did communication before, and

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can I do a PhD? Will you even accept me?” I’ll never forget his words, because he's just: “Brother! I've been waiting on you!” [general laughter] I’m like, “Who’s this crazy white man? Where’s the door? I think I got him if he does something.” [laughter continues] But what he’d been doing—of course, I didn’t know—he’d been going to seminary. And he'd been telling, he'd been talking to the folks at the seminary saying, “I got this PhD program in rhetoric that will be probably very beneficial to MDiv graduates,” you know, “you oughta come.” And nobody took him up on the offer. I literally just walked off the street and did. And so I found myself fall of 2003 in the rhetorical theory class, studying Isocrates and Plato and Socrates and all that, and I was like, “What the [pauses] heck, heck have I got myself into?” [laughter] Me and my good friend at the time, Frank Thomas, who was pastor of Mississippi Boulevard, we started together and we looking at each other in the classroom, like, “Oh my God, what is this?” Until we got to Augustine, and then Augustine—“Oh, okay.” Then that began the process. And even then, I was—look, I was going to be cool with the PhD and just, you know, if I get a couple of adjunct teaching gigs, fine. But it really began to set in when I showed up at my first NCA, National Communication Association, when I met all of those wonderful scholars—you asked about who kind of inspired you and stuff, so—when I met people like Ron Jackson, and I met people such as Jamel Bell, and others who were just, you know, doing this work. And I’m like—my advisor, Mike Leff, was my biggest inspiration. So that's why I'm a close reader now, a textual critic. Then that's when I met Kirt Wilson, and then all of a sudden, I met Robert Terrill, and I met all these other rhetoricians and stuff. And then the best thing that ever happened to me to get on the English side of this whole thing is that Leff had me do an independent study [quietly]—because nobody could actually teach what I was studying: Henry McNeal Turner, Black church—“I just want you to do, I want you to just find everything you can find out about African American rhetoric, and just give me an annotated bibliography.” For the whole semester, that's what I did. So I ended up being like sixteen-plus pages long. And that's when I—Elaine Richardson shows up [sounds of agreement], Tamika Carey shows up [J laughs], Gwendolyn Pough shows up. I’m like, “All these wonderful—” [trails off] And then when I learned about this conference, RSA, that those people go to this conference with the communication people and we can hang out, that's when I met Adam Banks and Gilyard and all of those folks. So that's basically just really how I got here, man.

H: I can't remember which one, but I think I first met you at RSA, and you were given a paper on Turner. And I remember thinking, “Who is this dude Andre?” [J chuckles] I mean, your delivery style—it wasn't anything that I was used to at an academic conference. But our table just got larger, so we gotta make sure we get Ersula and Gwendolyn in the conversation. So we're just talking, we're just sharing origin stories. So just go ahead and say your name, your title, where you are.

Gwendolyn Pough [P]: My name is Gwendolyn Pugh, and I am a professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at Syracuse University. [30:14] And when did I know that I wanted to be a scholar of rhetoric? That is a good question because I don't think I knew that I wanted to be a scholar of rhetoric when I decided to go to grad school. I was in an undergrad program that was an English major, but it had a writing concentration, and you just took a whole bunch of writing classes—playwriting, screenwriting, advanced composition, advanced persuasive writing, so every kind of writing class you could think of. And I did a master's in creative writing because I wanted to be a writer first. And so I entered Northeastern University thinking I'm gonna do this creative writing thing. But they said, “Oh, you have to have a dual focus.” So I was like, I'm not doing any of this literature stuff, I only— [general laughter] The classes that I took in undergrad that were lit courses were ones under duress. I didn’t want to do that again. Like, nineteenth century, any of that stuff. So I said, “Huh, composition. This must be like those advanced composition writing classes I took in undergrad.” So I'm thinking I'm gonna do that as my second focus and it'll just be a lot of different writing. And lo and behold, it was this field called composition studies, that I was actually learning about pedagogy and, like, the teaching of writing, which I was like, “What is this? I don't know, if I'm, you know, that interested.” And then I had to take—the first history of rhetoric class was a part of that. And so I got introduced to the field very accidentally—like, I had no idea what I was stepping into when I picked my second focus. But I say all that to say that I then fell in love with comp/rhet, as I started calling it, and decided to do my PhD in rhetoric after that. And so it was kind of like accidentally-becoming-an-academic-when-I-really-just-wanted-to-be-a-writer trajectory.

H: You know, we share a similar story, because the same thing happened to me. I did an MFA program. And I took a course—it was suggested that I get a certificate and rhetoric and composition, and I took a course on rhetorical education. And I'm like, “What is this rhetoric thing? What in the heck?” And it just opened up a whole new world. Yeah. Ersula?

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O: Ersula Ore, associate professor, Arizona State University. My origin story begins with my father telling me that I wasn't going to be—I had signed up for creative writing, and that's what I planned on doing, was being a creative writer. And my understanding was, as long as I got to read and write and work with students, I'd be happy. And that's all I wanted to do was just read and write and work with students. I'm first generation, my father was like, “Well, you ain’t going to make no money doing that. What you going to be, Toni Morrison.” I was like, “No, I'll be the first Ersula Ore!” He’s like, “Well that ain't nobody. You got to get a job. You run your mouth so much, you need to be a lawyer. I don't know why you go to school for this creative writing stuff.” So I'm in undergrad and I did an English and anthropology major. Because I was really interested in the correlation between what I was seeing in the social world and in the creative writing and the fiction. And I didn't know what I was tracing, but the short of it is that I was following a rhetorical history of Black women throughout the diaspora. And so it wasn't until I was in Greece for a couple of months, and there was—some shit popped off is the short of it. And I was called a feminist like it was a really bad thing. And I wasn't—I didn't know what a feminist was, truth be told. Like, I really didn't know, it just seemed like some slanderous term. And then I was like, “Well, maybe somebody will pay me to figure this out.” [quiet chuckles] So I said, I still wanted to read and write. And I just thought that if I got an advanced degree, you know, in literature, maybe I could sustain my creative writing career. And that was just really the game plan. And being first generation not having any money, it was like, “Well, who's gonna pay me to make this happen?” I'm just real simple, kind of strategic, but real simple. And so I applied to various graduate programs throughout the country that would support me—and I have to say that originally, when I’d applied for undergraduate programs, they were all creative writing, and I got into them, but my parents and I had a lot of debate about this. And so I ended up going to Maryland because I had gotten a couple of scholarships to creative writing programs, but it was still this whole thing about, “That's not going to sustain you, you’re not not gonna make no money.” You know, it was all about making money. And so I ended up applying to Maryland, I got in, but I ended up establishing a dual degree program for myself in English and anthropology. From there, I taught high school for a couple of years, because I really wanted to teach, but I didn't know if I had the chops to teach. I didn't know if I had the patience to teach. And so I taught high school for two years, and I was like, “Oh, I could do this, I can do both.” I can teach, I can write, I can learn, I can read. And as long as I get to do those things, I'll be happy. Like, I can find a way to make my life work as long as I do those things. And so I went to Penn State, because they had a dual degree women’s and gender studies and English program. And I got a full ride to go and drove up to Penn State, and the short of it is that I went to the dark side, as they say—the dark side being I came over to rhetoric. And this happened because my first rhetoric class was taken in the Communication Arts and Sciences program, aka comm studies at Penn State, with Deborah Atwater. And so that was my first exposure to Black woman's rhetorics. [sounds of acknowledgement and affirmation] And I was like, “Ooh, so who else is doing this?” And I met Dr. Gilyard, and I was like, “Well shit, this is a no brainer.” Second class I took was Rhetorics of the Civil Rights Movement, and it was in that class, where—I was actually in that class with David and a couple of other folks in the cohort. And it was in that class where, the short of it is that’s where I developed what is now my book project, what was my first book. I had noticed that no one had really talked about the circulation of Emmett Till’s photograph, and the power of the image, I thought, was really significant. And so I wrote a paper about that, and then I just followed it from there, and it blew up from that. And so here I am, now at ASU, associate professor, working in rhetorics of race—and racialized violence, in particular, specifically lynching—and discourses of civility.

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H: It's amazing to hear these stories and see the overlap and the connections and how, you know, we all we all came to this as a career field. I didn't teach high school or anything, but I taught at a community college. You know, so hearing these stories, it’s like, “Wow, there's a lot in common.” The other thing too I was sitting her thinking, I was like, “When was the last time I sat in the room with this many Black rhetoricians?”

O: My grad classes!

[laughter]

H: Because I didn’t go to Penn State, which I call the Black Mecca for—Mecca for African American rhetoric. But this is—

O: I would like to say something to that, just because, thinking strategically about the ways that scholars come up, and they become senior scholars, and they have been able to make certain kinds of plans and setups and ultimately establish pipelines at various institutions. You know, Doc [Gilyard] did that at Penn State. And then he worked to, you know, I would say grab Black scholars and advocate for Black scholars to come there. And keep in mind the Happy Valley ain't happy, and anybody been to Happy Valley know that. But it was about the community that was made, the academic community within the department that was made, the way he worked to establish a sense of cohesion amongst folks that were there. We weren't all the same, we didn't all come from the same cloth, but we were there, you know, for the same reasons. And so that familial dynamic was supportive and important, and it sustained those of us who wanted to stay as well as those who've moved on to other places as well. And thinking about what it means to develop a Black pipeline at an institution is something that I've been given more thought to, being at ASU and originally being the English department there, and then leaving that department in 2015, for triple-A-S: African and African American Studies. And while I was in the English department, you know, I had several graduate students throughout the years—I was there from 2011 to 2015—that came to me and said, “Hey, I want to come to ASU and work with you.” And I'm like, “No, no, no, no, no, no, no. ASU is not the place for you, ASU is not the place for me. There's nothing I can do with regard to protecting you, and I can't support you there. And there's no way that I can assure that you will be successful in this school, in this department, in this program.” And thinking about that when we look at the histories of other institutions and the way that Black folks, Black women and Black men, don't get tenure in particular institutions, and that long history and lineage despite the fact that there's a desire to bring them on board. There aren't the resources there. There isn't a culture there. There isn't a system of support there to sustain them or to build them or to grow. But I think about Syracuse as one of those spaces. You know, I think about Penn State is one of those spaces. Are there other institutions that come to mind for any of any of y'all?

[crosstalk]

H: Go ahead, Tamika.

C: I think East Carolina is a program to watch. I think they are really doing some dynamic work and cultivating Black scholars—in particular Black rhetoricians, Black women rhetoricians, So I gotta put some respect on them.

O: I was going to say it’s white women that run that program, but they are acquiring Black female scholars.

H: I know, Andre, you have—I know y’all doing some great things at Memphis as well.

J: Well, on the comm side, we would like to think that we are beginning and have done some major work in creating the pipeline. It's one of the reasons why I left my former job to come to Memphis, because I wanted to work with PhD students and I wanted to create a space for folk who are interested in studying in rhetoric, race, and religion in any shape, form, or fashion. And so we began to do that work—clear the field, so to speak, create that pathway. And we think we've done some major—I want to continue, and we have some more people to graduate and get out, but it's happening.

P: I will say we will have to put Michigan State on that.

O: No doubt, no doubt.

P: Their track record for Black scholars, scholars of color, PhDs, is—

O: In composition and literacy studies, yeah.

41:14

H: I think this conversation touches a little bit on a question I'll just open up to the group, anybody who would like to answer it: You know, in our academic disciplines, it's often said that we are charged with teaching future citizens how to write and speak effectively. But of course, we understandably do more than that. So just open up your thoughts as to what that more is, especially as Black scholars.

P: I mean, I think as Black scholars and scholars of color, we provide support and service to usually Black students and students of color in ways that maybe our white colleagues aren't called on to do in certain ways, right? Both undergrad and graduate level, like, the level of not just mentoring. Sometimes it's beyond just mentoring when folks are going through things. I know, like, when they were recently having the protests at my institution, I was one of the professors where they were like, “We want you to sit in on our negotiations with the upper administration,” because, you know—so these are the extra things. And if you’re—luckily, I'm a full professor, so it’s not anything to, I'm not afraid of the administration—but like, there were two other people that were junior, right?

O: More precarious situations.

P: More precarious situations, but they were also, you know, Black faculty members. So we get kind of that part of it that's more than just teaching students.

H: Do you ever have students come from outside of your department?

[sounds of agreement]

P: Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely. Yeah. Not majoring in your department, not—

[laughter]

P: Just somebody said to come see you, yeah.

O: I get the science and technology folks, I get the business folks. You know, I don't know these students, but by word of mouth, you know, my name has gotten around and circulated. And, you know, I say, if you need me, you call me, my door’s always open, and the door really is open. And so there's been a number of students from various disciplines that have walked through, and not just at ASU. As I was saying prior, you know, all my graduate students at ASU were all white, predominately white male. And when I slid out of the English department and went over to AAAS, you know, my position now is pretty much with regard to graduate students—because AAAS doesn't have a graduate program—but I, you know, participate in committee work for other units: Gender and Sexuality Studies, Justice Studies, Asian Pacific American Studies, and then in other departments, like in the comm department at ASU. But more specifically, and more commonly, more regularly, I end up serving as the outside reader for many individuals who are working in Black studies, in Black or African American rhetorics and technologies, who are at predominately white institutions who have predominantly white, if not all white committees, and is looking for a sounding board, looking for a voice, looking for someone to help support and articulate certain arguments that they don't have the capacity to, that they're developing and working on. But because of the precarity of their situation, and the dynamics of power hierarchies, they need an advocate, and so that's the role that I more commonly play with regard to graduate students.

G: I think for me, that was always the draw of rhetoric in some way, but I began to see it very differently at Howard because I've run into those same experiences, just in a different way: Students from outside the department because of a particular expertise, or they heard you talk, or somebody said you were cool, or you could help with this event, you know, they come through for references, for you to sit in on panels, for you to sit in on negotiations and things of that nature. But rhetoric is, like, the bridge between the symbolic and the material for me in very powerful ways. And I think, you know, even though we don't have a formal rhetoric program in the English department, rhetoric is in just about—it's definitely in African American literature and culture, but it's in just about every different aspect of what folks teach within the English department once we begin to think about how symbols carry certain meanings, and then particularly for students of color, and particularly at this moment, helping them to make sense of the different meanings of the symbols that they're ingesting and consuming as well as the experiences that they're either witnessing or personally engaging in. To me, that is the most interesting thing about, you know, what rhetoric allows, especially as a vehicle. And I think we're we do that in our respective universities in different ways. But I really always appreciated that aspect of what we do in that way.

C: The trajectory of my work so far has not really allowed me to do the kind of visible institution-building yet because often, I'm the first rhetorician on the scene, right? Like, I'm your first Black professor, I'm your first Black female professor, I might be the only one that is claiming a clear identity as a rhetorician. And so often, what I find as my contribution is to help my students, particularly my Black students, understand their rhetorical condition. And I didn't mention Barbara Christian at first, but as I was thinking about it, you know, she asked that question: for whom are we doing what we're doing when we do literary criticism? I generally open my classes by saying, “For whom are we doing what we're doing when we do rhetorical criticism?” And that allows us to start thinking about power, that allows us to think about, you know, the institutions, the structures, the agents, the discourses that really construct their realities and what they can do to push back. But I find a lot of the time that this involves considerable care work. I'm thinking about the grad class that I just taught on Black woman's rhetoric. So there were moments where like, women just were crying in the middle of class. And this is a course of maybe nine graduate students, seven of whom would identify as Black women. And so to create the space, and also to do the work of, like, you know, building back up, because I've worked in some hostile institutions, and so I would like to think that I'm building a pipeline through the curriculum, but sometimes I just got to give a student a hug. [chuckles, general sounds of affirmation] Give them language, you know, to say—and I mentioned this earlier—rhetoric helps us understand why and how. Sometimes it's that basic.

48:38

H: Yes. Well, I think that's a perfect segue to the next question, and which really was kind of the motivation for me to want to have this conversation with all of you. As you know, it's been two years since the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and we're just several weeks since the shooting in Buffalo. Academia has responded in part with a, seemingly to me, renewed interest in developing antiracist pedagogies and curricula. From your observations, what has been the impact of those efforts and what might universities do to improve their effectiveness? And before you answer, let me just share that I started my position and in 2020, and it felt like I was being called to be on every committee, every antiracism diversity committee, and everyone was developing this this language. So I would just like to hear what you have to have to say.

O: Can I just insert one thing?

J: Sure.

O: It's tokenism 101. It’s tokenism 101. I have a hard time—it's about the marketability of Black death and the way they can leverage Black death to call upon students to attend their institution by representing that they are supportive, that they are insightful, that there is a place when the country communicates there is no place. I mean, the way I've been seeing institutions advertise their inclusiveness and their receptiveness, it very much feels like a new kind of advertisement. Rather than having the typical picture that we see of, you know, the Black person and the Asian person and the white person on the cover of the application or on the website, you know, there's a discourse of inclusivity. And there's a discourse of inclusivity that is meant to mark many of these institutions as institutions that are welcoming of particularly Black students, students of color, non-gender-conforming individuals as well, and it’s a falsehood because you get to these institutions and the same kind of violences that allow them to run and perpetuate and build themselves are the same kind of violences and biases that exist and I feel like, in some ways, become kind of the battery mechanism that, you know, if we—and this sounds, I know this sounds incredibly pessimistic and negative, but being called in the way I've been called, having my own personal violent experiences, being called on by others who are trying to navigate, you know, the hardships and violences of anti-Blackness, and gendered anti-Black violence, specifically, of institutional logics, I can't help but to recognize a common thread. And so to see the way that, you know, Black scholars, potential Black scholars, future Black scholars get set up to fall down just for the benefit of the institution to say that it is not X or to check a box, it's just another form of the auction block to me.

J: And the belief that if, when you fall down, I can just get another one. You know, we just—

[crosstalk]

52:03

O: The fungibility—

P: Or no, not even have to get another one. Because a lot of them will say, “Well, you know, we tried, though. We just can’t retain, and so we just won't, we did try, and we had—”

O: Right, and so I've worked to make arguments about the importance and the necessity of cluster hires, and what comes along with a cluster hire and the institutional support of Black scholars, non-Black scholars, and non-gender-conforming scholars. And this is the primary reason I've said with regard to the English department in particular, to Black students who say, you know, “I want to come work with you as ASU,” the short of it is that the university space is a crazy-making space and it’s a murderous space. And we have all worked to try to find ways to succeed and to survive, and I don't want to survive, I want to thrive, and I want to exercise and live my life in a form of joy. And it's hard for me to, in the midst of me trying to figure that out, trying to make sure that I can protect someone else while I am not protected, and while I'm looking for ways to establish protection. And so that's why I feel as though at this point, I bet I can better serve others by providing my wisdom and knowledge and my presence from a distance rather than bringing them on board to what I call—I mean, I've been thinking about this, and at some point in time it's going to come together, but from plantation to plantation to plantation to plantation. [53:22] And it's one thing to know your enemy, right, and it's another thing to invite other people on board to say, “Hey, come to this plantation because there’s certain kinds of protections that I can make sure are in place for you and in place for us so that we can thrive.” And I'm at a point now where I'm working to try to figure that out and establish that, specifically in the sense that I was called upon to run a couple of searches, and given my history at ASU, you know, I definitely told the president, I said, “I'm the last person that you want to run a search for you. I'm the last person to advocate for this institution. And if I'm going to do this, these are the concessions that I need to have in place: I need you to ensure that if we bring these Black scholars on that this, this, this, this, and this needs to happen.” And I busted my ass to make sure that those things were in place. And so I'm looking to hold the university to it, we have shit in writing. And so I don't know how to move any other way. Because when I'm asked to come forward, or I'm asked to show up a certain kind of ways, it only comes when the university puts out in ways that hold it accountable. And that those points of accountability are measurable.

G: I think that's the push-pull of what we do as well. And in one sense, we're talking about how do you stop people from suffering within a system that has been designed to either elide or ignore certain realities, certain experiences, certain bodies versus what we know the work we do, the work that we enjoy can do for others. And so I've always been interested in kind of—not just community outreach, but how community is so connected to what we do rhetorically because it speaks to the plurality of different groups, different communities that we all navigate and variety of ways. And then it also helps us begin to think about how do you get outside of—Ersula uses the language of “plantation,” but how do you get outside of these structures that are meant to do a particular thing that is not kind to, you know, to the people that we value and to their psyches to their bodies in certain ways? How do you do that both/and work? To me, I think that's, you know, the central question that comes out of these last couple of years. And so I'm ready to throw away this—not antiracism as a concept that does particular work for how we combat or speak to structures that work in a certain way, but antiracism as this kind of quick catch-all term that people point to to say, “Look, I'm not racist in a particular way.” It becomes problematic because you don't even understand—

P: Or when it's coopted by these institutions. So now I have to attend the diversity antiracist training, and us—you know, it ends up triggering the faculty of color and the Black faculty in the room because all these white folks in the training just spouting, [laughs] you know, all kinds of stuff. And it's just, like, why do we have to sit through this? You know, it's all performance anyway because the institution isn't really invested in it, because if they were, it wouldn't be like a little half-day or three-hour, one-time training that you can just say all of our faculty has.

O: It’d be stitched into the programming. I’d be stitched into tenure and promotion, you know.

P: Yeah.

O: It’d be stitched into hiring. There'd be measurable outcomes and consequences for not abiding by what are supposed to be the values of the mission of the institution.

P: Exactly.

O: But we don't see that. We get the lip service of that, we get the advertising and marketing of that, to the benefit of the institution and the marketability of the institution. And also, when I think about the marketability of the institution, I think about the ways that universities use this language and this discourse to leverage dividends and funds, right? You get to apply for grants that demonstrate that you're X kind of university as a result of having XYZ program that actually does absolutely nothing, or XYZ department that does absolutely nothing, right? But you get to get, you know, $200,000, or, you know, $5 million for X project because you've demonstrated on paper what you're doing, when actually in practice it doesn't exist.

57:38

J: Thinking about a couple of things, actually, here. First, directly to the question, for me, really, nothing really changed for me teaching-wise, pedagogical-wise. [sounds of agreement] It was just, “Oh, okay, we're still doing this.” I think one of the—the stuff that happened real badly, I guess, is a whole bunch of people tried to start teaching race that had never, ever taught it ever, and they did it horribly. And they were just messing up all over the place. And at the University of Memphis, and I know, just by perusing social media, other schools and institutions as well, people were trying to, you know, hitch on the train, so to speak: “I know I need to address it.” But there was nothing in your background, nothing in your teaching before, nothing in your research that would allow you the intellectual acumen, the sensitivity, the—

C: The commitment.

J: The commitment, the discernment—that's the word I was looking for—the discernment, to discern if somebody is really, you know, being triggered or being bothered that—but you just push on and you just, you know, under the guise of, you know, free speech, or, “I'm teaching this, this is just me teaching.”

O: Or me managing my guilt to demonstrate that I'm not racist.

J: [laughs] Out loud and in public. Right, right, exactly. And it’s just like, “Okay.”

P: We had a diversity training at my institution—and I only know about this because, you know, a faculty member in my department is partners with the faculty member in the department that it happened—where the diversity trainer decided, “I'm just going to allow people to make anonymous comments and just say how they feel about these issues and these things.” And so the people of color in the department are just seeing all these anonymous, racist, problematic, toxic things that—you know, anonymous, that you got the freedom to just say whatever you want to say. So it’s just like—

J: And then you know that that right there, whatever was going on in that workshop was absolutely not working.

P: Yeah! No!

O: But it wasn’t meant to either.

1:00:00

P: I spoke to the person who was doing this, because this is an associate dean of diversity, and I said, “Why would you do that?” ”Because I just wanted to get it all out in the open, I wanted people to see.” And I’m just like, “But you’re triggering, you can't just—”

O: I mean, that in and of itself is asinine, because I don't need to see what I already know.

P: Yes!

J: Right, right.

O: You know what I mean? Like, it wasn't about us seeing. It was about excising a level of guilt. I'm sorry, Tamika.

C: No, I just want to return to Andre’s comment about discernment because some of these efforts have clarified for me how little capacity I have. Like, in this whole movement to implement antiracist pedagogies and stuff, like, I don't have time. Truth is, I'm tired, right? [murmurs of agreement] And so I only have a certain amount of resources, and I'm giving that to the students. I'm pouring life into them; that is renewal for me. And I can't show up to, you know, this reading group, or this particular project. And even if I do show up to certain conversations that might prioritize, you know, a project that seems different than mine, I'm going to bring Black feminism with me, I'm going to bring African American rhetoric with me in a critical way so that if I'm at the table, you will know who I'm there to represent. But just that kind of clarity of, like, we only have so much capacity because before this universities were sucking the life out of us, and now you want to do this in the guise of diversity? Uh-uh. No.

P: Or to help teach your colleagues who should know.

O: Or to get an additional line on your CV.

P: Or to help teach these other professors or staff people what they should already know.

C: That's not my project, I heard someone say.

[laughter]

O: I recall that phrase. I recall that phrase.

J: Yup.

G: One term that comes to mind as well, hearing Andre talk and everybody talk, is memory. And I think about in terms of Toni Morrison's conceptualization of memory as this practice in which we're always reaching back to try to understand the interiority but also the practices of those who came before us in order to understand, you know, where we're at now. But then also memory as in remembering who I am, remembering that I am one whole body and not Superman or Superwoman, and need to kind of respond to—

P: Captain Save ‘Em.

[laughter]

G: Yeah. Immediate moments of crisis.

O: I’m sorry, to your point about Captain Save A Hoe—

[renewed laughter]

O: Real talk, real talk. That's what the university comes to us for: to save. And the moment we say no, we're not saving, is one of the moments that yet again we become problematic.

P: Yeah. Like, the magical Negro is a myth. I'm not here to fix—I can't fix it. Yeah.

J: Mmhmm. But they really do believe you can [chuckles] in some instances. [laughs] That’s why I keep—

H: So what would you all say to—and there are few of us out there—junior Black professors who don't have tenure yet, and they're getting asked to do all these things and be a part of it. It's a precarious situation.

O: It is.

P: I was gonna say, one of the things that I've noticed about some of the junior scholars coming up that, like, I didn't have is they are very clear about, like, how are you compensating my labor?

O: They don’t play no games.

P: Even, I'm noticing it with some of the students, they're like, “Oh, university, you want us to be on these committees? You want us to help you fix the problems we’re telling you that are broke? You have to compensate our labor.” Like, they’re very clear.

[sounds of agreement]

H: Mmm. Compensate the labor.

P: They're not here to be like, you know, “Oh, I need to just do it because I got to help them.” No. Those days are over.

O: Or “I feel obligated.” I will say on some levels, there is an underlying sense of entitlement, and at other levels, it is a clear understanding of boundaries.

P: Yeah.

O: Because they are reading the way, you know, racialized logics work against them, and so they're making them work for them.

P: Yeah.

G: Mmhmm.

1:04:20

J: I think that's where— [crosstalk] Oh, go ahead.

O: No, no.

J: No, I was gonna just say this is also where, when you make that stand, it would be nice if you had someone on faculty that's going to ride with you on that.

P: Yeah, yeah.

J: So I'm going into the meeting, saying, “No, Derek needs [knocks hand on table] this, Derek needs that.”

O: You don’t ask Derek to do that!

J: That’s what I’m saying! [laugher]

O: That's the first thing. You don’t ask Derek to do that. That’s not what you ask junior faculty and graduate students to do.

J: No! And that brings me to the other point I wanted to make, and I know we show much love to our HBCUs and the Black faculty there, and rightfully so. But Black faculty in these PWIs, my God, the work that—

[others scoffing in agreement]

1:04:56

J: You know, the running joke is my office is the HBCU office. So just come on in! “Hey, Dr. Johnson! How’re you doing?”

C: I’m literally in the basement.

[laughter and crosstalk]

J: We’re taking pictures inside. I mean, but the whole notion of people feeling comfortable being around you, being able to share some of their grievances, but also some of their joys, some of their happiness, some of the stuff that's going on in their life that's good, and I'm there for it. I really am. I try to embrace, I do discern, I try to, you know, make sure that I'm not just you know, killing myself, of course. And I have some wonderful students that help me do just that. They’re telling me that, “Doc, you need to go, stay at home, don't worry about this, get some rest, do whatever.” On my—well, sabbatical, if you want to call it that. It was a work sabbatical, whatever they call it, a PDA. But anyway, I tried to honor that, you know, even though there were some students that were finishing comps, that were getting their prospectus out of the way, and all of that. And I met all of those obligations. But Black faculty in PWIs, man. We do a whole lot in making sure that those Black students and other students of color feel as comfortable as we possibly can. And going to Ersula’s point about, you know, in order to actually help somebody else, you got to feel like you are situated to help somebody.

P: You got to put the safety mask on yourself first. [chuckles]

[crosstalk]

J: Because if you’re trying to help folks and you're not really safe yourself, everybody goes down. And so one of the things I can say where I am right now is right at this moment, as we are doing this, at this particular time, could change tomorrow, but right now, I'm in a good place where I can do just that. And I think students as well as colleagues will vouch for me when I say that.

H: So how can institutions better support their Black graduate students? I mean, I attended an institution that there weren’t any Black faculty amongst the rhetoric scholars. I was one of those students who found Black faculty elsewhere in the institution.

J: We were just whispering over here about that—was it RSA?

C: Yes, it was a webinar.

H: That’s right.

J: A webinar on, I guess, graduate students and helping out, especially, students of color, Black students. In particular, for me, schools can be intentional. That was my answer back then and it’s still my answer. Now, I hold you accountable in the meeting out loud: “Oh, y'all told me and told us that you wanted to do this. I don't see any intentionality going on. You're not even trying.”

H: Right.

J: So once that's out in the open, you can, you know, kind of skirt around it and play like I didn't say it, but I'm gonna keep saying it. So the intentionality piece—like, if you say you want Black graduate students, let's be intentional about that. Second one is, when you're intentional about that, you're going to also need some Black faculty. And you're going to need to allow those Black faculty members to teach and create courses that are not currently in the curriculum because one of the major things that we have—to use a business term—to sell, to market is our ability to create engaging, thoughtful, you know, just exciting classes—

O: Curriculum.

J: —that students will just jump into. And the other part of that is not only just take the class to get the grade, but actually transformation beginning, transformation happening in those classes. And those are the two things that you initially need to start off with, I think, before you even get—I mean, you know, money is great, you know, the stipends and all of those, and funding. But I think at the core of it, you need those things. Go ahead.

C: And I want to follow Andre because I was also on that webinar, and Andre is talking about kind of practical staffing interventions. But there really needs to be some cultural interventions because some of the violence that I've seen go down in graduate programs through myths of Black scholars automatically getting jobs creates hostile environments—

J: Yes! No, you’re right!

C: —where white students are sometimes, you know, passive aggressive sometimes to their peers, because the lore is, the assumption—

J: “Oh, you know you gonna get you a job.” [laughs]

C: “Oh, you know you gonna get a job.”

O: “They hiring Black.”

J: Right. That’s a good point.

C: The other thing is kind of just a passive approach. Like, you know, “You're going to be working with this professor, so I don't really need, as a white Professor, sometimes to develop any kind of vocabulary that allows me to talk about your work in a way that celebrates its merits because I'm just going to trust that your professors have you.” So then if there's a need for these white professors to advocate for these Black students, the language is vague.

[general agreement]

P: There’s the other side too where white professors feel like they want that Black student, they have to get them one Black student, and they want to—

C: Oh, God.

O: Again. Again. Again!

P: They can't—like they're battling to get their one Black student. I've seen the other part of it where— [trails off, laughs]

J: Oh!

C: But the point I'm trying to make is that in addition to these kind of practical structures, we need to address cultures—

J: You’re absolutely right.

C: —and kind of unspoken resentment.

P: There’s another layer in the culture too, where some of the microaggressions that grad students and faculty experience in these departments are not necessarily from faculty, but sometimes staff members. Like there's, you know, people being called another person's name. Don't look nothing like that, but y’all the three Black women in the department and I know it's one of y'all, like—

O: Or the three of y’all, y'all seem to always be in a hallway conversating. What's the issue?

[general laughter and agreement]

P: Oh, yeah. Yes.

O: That’s what I always got.

P: As soon as they see two or three Black people talking in a department, they want to come and—

O: It’s a coup! It’s a coup happening.

P: Yeah!

O: And this was the business officer coming up to me talking about, “So what's going on here?” And I said, “Well, we’re minding our business? What are you doing?” [J laughs, then sighs]

P: Yeah, so those are all things that grad students experience, faculty members experience, that department culture that, you know, when people do leave—like, I know of colleagues who have left whole jobs because of the kind of microaggressions they experienced. Not, I mean, from their colleagues, but some of it was, like, issues with staff getting their reimbursements back—

O: Or support and certain kind of endowments, telling them how they can and can’t spend their money.

P: Yeah!

J: Right.

P: Yeah! And then when they complain—not feeling, you know, because we tend to do this thing in our field, which is good, because I do think, you know, we need to be cognizant of issues of like privilege and whatever, but—there's this way in which we're like, “Oh, but you know, it's a staff person, and we can't, we need to,” but it's just like, we also need to realize racism is real. And like—

G: And it doesn't need to be intentional.

P: And you can't like be like, “Oh, because this person is staff, we feel like we don't want to say anything.” But it's just like, you have a job, and your job is not to be racist to the faculty and students. So, yeah.

H: Is there hope? Is there hope for change? I'm drawing from Roxane Gay’s keynote [at RSA].

J: I'm a prophetic pessimists, though. [laughs] I'm still going out there. I joke and I say, “Yeah, I'm going out there. I'm gonna protest. I'm gonna do all that I need to do. But I don't expect anything to change overnight.”

1:13:24

P: I’m willing to be pleasantly surprised, but I’m not expecting it.

1:13:28

J: [laughs]

C: Yeah, I don't think that I am going to measure this work in terms of hope yet. You know, I just have to make sure that the people encharged to me are well and that they can go out and have a quality of life.

O: And I think about that on incremental terms, right? I don't think about a larger map of hope. I think about what I'm able to effect under the conditions in which I'm working.

J: And for me, it's call. So I'm called to this work, and since I’m called to this work, then the thing that matters to me—I like your notion of incremental measures—but what matters to me is this understanding that at the end of the day, I can look myself in the mirror and I can say, “I did what I was called to do today, and I've tried to do it to the best of my ability.” And then, you know—that's exactly what, that's actually what I tell my students, I tell them about all the possibilities of microaggressions, and even if you get these jobs, like a couple of students got these wonderful jobs, and we got some more big announcements coming.

O: Okay, okay, okay. Okay, Dr. Andre!

[laughter]

J: And so people may think, “Oh, just because you’re Black you got this job,” or, “Just because they're hiring, and you just walked in there—"

P: Black people have to be twice as—

J: Right! Exactly. [laughs]

P: Like, I always tell people, there's nobody out here saying, “Ooh, I just want to keep this little Black girl a job because she a little Black girl!” [crosstalk]

H: That’s right.

P: Like, you have to be twice as good to do anything to even make it to the point where you might could get a job, you know.

J: Exactly. And some of the horror stories you hear in these search meetings where people—I mean, even folks you thought was like, “You all right, you might be on—“ You know, they are finding every angle they can not to hire, to the point where, “Well, you know, she might not like the city,” [exasperated laugh] or any other thing, you know, trying to not hire. But you want to diversify. And see, that's where intentionality comes in.

P: Or people, like, I've seen people say, “Well, we know we're not gonna be able to get this person, so we're not even going to try.”

J: Right! So what kind of rhetoric is that when somebody says—

P: [laughs]

J: Well, that is a strategy. Like, my strategy is that I would like to have that, but—

[laughter and crosstalk]

P: Like, “We could try to get this person, but then we’ll mess around and we won't get them and then we won't get anybody and we'll have a failed—”

O: “We’ll have a failed search.”

P: Yeah. So I've seen this, you know, on so many levels.

G: I think I’m the lone optimist at this table.

P: Aww.

G: Probably for many reasons, but I think just, like, as someone who came into the game very green—

O: No pun intended. [others repeating and laughing]

G: —and coming to understand the history even of just African American rhetoric and how it's worked its way so centrally into our departments, into our field, into our conversations about this stuff, and then just looking at the different kinds of projects, the different kinds of work that I see people do. It gives me hope, in large part because of, like, the variety of projects, because of the different ways that people are being free in this moment to kind of think creatively and deeply about what we do with language and why it matters, why it matters to our students, what we do with the visual work that is present for us. [1:17:19] It is, in one sense, very moving to me to just to see the progress in that regard. But it's also so freeing to see how the students take it up. When I say that they're free, when I say that they are very clear about who they are in a lot of ways, they are very clear, you know, about what's possible for them. And we've used the word “entitlement” and things of that nature, but I've been very appreciative just of the beauty in how they've responded to what we're doing.

P: That's the beauty of teaching right now, right? Like I just realized these students, the students that are in our classes now, within the last three, four years, maybe almost—like, they’re the students who were in high school protesting, Black Lives Matter, went with their mamas to the Women's March, for better or for worse, wearing their little hats.

[crosstalk, sounds of agreement]

O: Understand the importance of the vote.

P: Walked out of their high schools because of school shootings. You know, white, Black, all of these students.

O: Right, right.

C: That’s the best part.

P: So that's really the beauty of teaching right now.

G: And they're so receptive.

J: And that’s good! And yet we do that, and that is just wonderful when we have an opportunity to really make that connection, undergrad and grad students, so we’re with you.

P: That's something to be hopeful about. [sounds of agreement] The rest of it, no, but—

[laughter and scattered clapping]

J: We’re gonna ride with you!

1:18:51

H: So in some ways, then, what you were saying, David—and everyone else—might be the answer to this last question. So it's this tradition of this podcast to have the previous guest ask a question for the next guest—or in this case, guests—to answer. [quiet crosstalk] And the last guest was Cedric Burrows from Marquette, and he asked, “How are you going to be the change in the institution for social justice?” I think we've answered that. But if someone else who was listening was going to answer that question—how are they are going to be to change in their institution for social justice—what I'm hearing coming out is to take care of your students, to support your students, protect your students as best you can.

P: Cause trouble.

O: The good kind.

P: The good trouble. Yeah.

O: The pedagogy of care and the good trouble.

P: Like, shake things up. Like, if you're in a space and you have any kind of, you know, privilege to say or do—

O: Influence, right.

P: Like, if you’ve got that tenure already, even if you don't—because my motto is I'm gonna be me regardless from here because I don’t have time to fake it for six years and try to remember who I was before so I can start being myself. [laughter and crosstalk] Yeah. But yeah, like, use your space, if you are at the table, ask the question that’s gonna make people—

O: Uncomfortable.

P: —uncomfortable.

C: But also take care of yourself.

J: Take care of yourself.

C: Because one of the most radical things is to keep showing up. [strong murmurs of agreement] You know, you can teach yourself into burnout. And I go hard for my students, but you can wear yourself out.

P: Well, one of the things when I was in grad school, it was like, this moment where so many Black women academics seem to be dying.

O: Early. Yes!

P: Dying early, like 40s, 50s. And I was like, “Whoa,” this seems, like, I'm always saying, “You're not gonna kill me.”

H: So self-care?

P: Yeah, self-care is important. Don't stress. Like, oh my God, trying to have a sister have a stroke. No, I'm not getting mad over this. No. You can't let them take you there.

O: And this goes back to something that I really appreciate—because, you know, they taught me that shit—is the importance of those boundaries. Right? Rather than feeling as though I’m beholden, rather than feeling as though I don't have a choice, rather than feeling as though I'm obligated, you know, despite my status of precarity, I do have choices. You know, one thing my pops used to always say: “You got choices. You might not like the choices you got, but you always got choices.” And have a contingency for the contingency. You know what I'm saying?

P: I always say I keep my CV updated and ready.

[laughter]

O: All I heard was “locked and loaded.” [renewed laughter] Locked and loaded.

P: I don't have to stay at this job.

H: So what's the question that we want the next guest to answer?

P: Come up with a good question, y’all.

O: I’m about to say, “What’s the question, David?”

H: So what's the question? What do we want to ask the next guest?

O: All I got at this point is something about, you know, how do you determine the ways you show up and why?

G: I like that.

J: I like that one.

H: How you determine the ways you show up [others chiming in] and why?

G: And for whom?

O: To what extent for what purposes?

H: I think we're in agreement with that. Well, thank you all for sitting down and having this roundtable.

O: Thank you, Derek.

J: Thank you for the invitation.

H: I mean, this is a dream come true, and I want to give a special thanks to Ersula who helped make it happen.

O: Oh, man. Thanks for giving me the opportunity. I appreciate it. I mean, we started at RSA.

H: We did.

O: We started at RSA—

H: 2013. Summer institute in Kansas.

O: In Kansas.

H: Yes.

O: Mount Oread.

H: Right. I remember you talking to me about your book, and I was like, “Oh, this is dope.” And it is, and you're dope.

O: Aw, thank you, sir. I appreciate that.

H: And I'm just happy to be able to talk to the Avengers here as you all go back and continue your fight at your institutions.

O: With the president-elect! Before we close out, I just want to say, Gwen, I'm very excited about your forthcoming presidency, about the ways—

G: Same here.

[scattered applause and affirmation]

O: I mean, in the in the society’s 56-year history, you will be the first Black woman to ever preside as president, and that's no small feat, but more importantly, the fact that it's you is kind of everything for me. I'm looking forward to what you do, and so please call upon me.

P: I will. You know I will. Look, I’ll be like, “It’s on the podcast!”

[all laughing]

O: On the podcast!

J: Keep that part in!

[laughter as drumbeat from *Rhetoricity* theme song fades in, continuing beyond outro voiceover]

Detweiler: That's it for this episode of *Rhetoricity*. Thanks again to guest host and moderator Derek Handley as well as Tamika Carey, David Green, Andre Johnson, Ersula Ore, and Gwendolyn Pough. I'll be back—well, at some point. The work of administration, mentoring, and teaching are no joke at the moment, dear listeners, and while I like this podcast too much to call it quits, I remain embroiled in too many other things for it to be more than a fond destination I visit with unpredictable frequency, even as I dream of getting back there, someday, more regularly. To paraphrase Gonzo from *The Muppet Movie*, I'm going to make podcasts someday. Till then, the call for guest-hosted episodes remains open! You can visit my website, RhetEric.org--that's r-h-e-t-e-r-i-c dot o-r-g for my contact information. And in the meantime, a reminder that this episode is part of The 3rd Annual Big Rhetorical Podcast Carnival, so look up *The Big Rhetorical Podcast* to find all kinds of other great shows in and around rhetoric and writing. Till next time,

[clip from *The Muppet Movie* fades in]

Gonzo: [singing plaintively with guitar accompaniment] I'm going to go back there some day.

[music fades out]