"The Path Chose Me": Keith Gilyard on His Career and Legacy
Transcribed by Eric Detweiler

[*Rhetoricity* theme plays]

Eric Detweiler [D]: All right, this is Eric Detweiler, coming to you—as you may be able to hear—through a slight head cold. But I am here talking with Derek Handley for a new interview that he is conducting for this episode with Keith Gilyard. So Derek, if you want to take a moment to introduce yourself for folks who haven't caught some of your past guest appearances on this podcast.

Derek G. Handley [H]: Sure! My name is Derek G. Handley. I'm an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. And this was my fourth guest-host podcast for Rhetoricity.

D: Yeah, and I know initially, you had laid it out as having a trilogy. [H laughs] You had your interview with Cedric Burrows, with April Baker-Bell, then the roundtable interview you did.

H: Right.

D: And this was the fourth. So this wasn't one, I know, initially you were planning on. So could you talk a little bit about what led to this particular interview and how it came together.

H: Sure. As you very well know, Eric, my volunteering to guest host was to highlight junior professors. But then the third podcast was mid-level or full professors, and that was a roundtable discussion: David Green, Ersula Ore, Andre Johnson, Tamika Carey, Gwendolyn Pugh. And that was such a wonderful discussion that I really enjoyed. And so after that interview, it came out in the conversation that I should reach out to Keith because he was highly influential in some of the folks' career who were at that table. And he's always been a scholar that I looked up to, and one of my initial conversations when I was thinking about a PhD program was with Keith. So the RSA Summer Institute this past summer—2023—was at Penn State. I thought it might be a perfect opportunity to see if we could score an interview and reached out to him, and he was more than gracious enough for us to come to his office. So that's how it came about. It really wasn't an initial plan of mine when starting and thinking about the trilogy, but just like in those blockbuster movies, you know, when something is deemed successful, you keep going back. [D laughs] That's why we're up to, like, Star Wars 9, 10, and 11—wherever we are. So yes, that's how it came about, and I don't think will be the beginning of a second trilogy. [chuckles] I don't know, but it was a really wonderful conversation.

D: All right, well, we'll find out if this is *The Force Awakens* later, I guess.

H: [laughs] Exactly. Exactly.

D: Well, you mentioned his influence on your work there a little bit, and I know that's something that of course will come up in the interview as well, but is there anything you want to talk through in terms of specifically how you see his work having influenced your own, or maybe more broadly having shaped the work that's now going on in African American rhetoric, the intersection of Black studies and rhetoric and composition, or what you see as kind of the big-picture influences there?

H: Sure, and this came out a little bit in the interview. I really enjoyed his book about Cornel West and the effect of Cornel West on composition studies. In addition, his most recent collaborative project with Adam Banks, *On African-American Rhetoric*, which I've taught that book several times in the classroom. But even prior to that, when I finished my MFA program in creative writing and was thinking about a PhD in rhetoric and writing studies, it was suggested that I reach out to Keith and speak to him a little bit. And I remember, I was living in Pittsburgh at the time, driving out to State College and sitting down and talking with him in his office—what they call the Barbershop—for about an hour. And to say that universes started to open up in my head is an understatement.

D: Mmm.

H: And what I find appealing about his work as well as the courses he teaches—and he writes about this in *On African-American Rhetoric*—is you're not limited by disciplinary lines. It's not literature over here and rhetoric over here, cultural studies, films over here. African American rhetoric encompasses all of that. And I found that very appealing. So Keith Gilyard's work was important to my development in understanding what African American rhetoric is or could be. You know, it seemed like that was focusing on African American rhetoric, Keith would have a chapter or was writing the introduction, giving the historiography of the field, which I found very helpful when I was putting together my reading list for my PhD program. Keith was kind of like my guide through the field, and I also it appealing that he was still publishing poetry while working as an academic, if you will. So a very profound impact. So you probably can tell when you're listening to the interview that I'll a little bit of a fan dude interviewing one of their professional heroes.

D: I think folks will pick up on that as they'll hear the some of the superhero references that have popped up in some previous interviews continue here.

H: [laughing] Right, right.

D: So for listeners of this episode, beyond some of the stuff you've brought up so far, is there anything in particular that you would suggest kind of keep an ear out for? You

know, what are the topics or threads for you that jumped out in the conversation that are worth maybe being aware of as the interview begins?

H: Sure. One of the things that I found very interesting is sort of this tension between composition studies and rhetoric slash rhetoricians. Now, these are some perhaps older debates, historical debates, but I find that history as he was talking about some of these things—some people identifying them as compositionists or rhetoricians, and the tensions there. Also the relationship with English education. So those two things, and I think they're connected, that I find very interesting. His path, his journey as to how he got here. He mentioned his blog, called the *Language Lane*, and you can find it at keithgilyard, all one word, dot com. So I think that that is interesting. But the one thing—the *one* thing—that really I think touched me, for this person who's so accomplished in the field and so many publications, but when I asked him about his legacy and all the things that he could be proud about, he talked about his students whose dissertations he advised and they later became books, right? And he has two shelves on his bookshelf for all the books that his students have published, and that just really got me to think about legacy and how we think about what we're trying to do. But also, if you're at an institution where you can work with graduate students, helping them to achieve their goals and dreams. And there's probably a certain amount of pride of joy in that, if not more, than in writing and published you're own work.

D: Yeah, for sure. Well, anything else you want to add into the mix before we jump to the interview itself here?

H: I just want to say thank you for providing this platform. I think it's been three years since we first started this.

D: Whew! Mmhmm.

H: I was going to say that this is going to be the last one. I mean, as much as I get love and enjoyment out of doing this, you do have to prepare. I have a new-found respect for you, Eric, in doing these podcasts on a regular basis.

D: [laughs] I'm glad someone does.

H: [laughs] But I'm not going to say this is it because I do enjoy it, and I'm quite certain that an idea will pop up in my head and I'll just email you, say, "Hey, what do you think about this?"

D: Oh, yeah. For sure. And I think, regardless, listeners can expect to hear your voice back on here at some point once your book comes out here in the next year or two. I don't know if you want to tease that at all for folks who aren't familiar with your research here.

H: Absolutely! Fingers crossed, the book—the first book—is in production. I don't want to give out a title because I'm still working about the title, but right now, if all goes well, it'll be out in fall of 2024. Just a quick summary: I am looking at the ways in which African American communities resisted urban renewal in the 1950s and '60s, and my case studies are Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and St. Paul, Minnesota. What rhetorical strategies did they use to confront the threat of urban renewal?

D: Gotcha. And that's Penn State University Press, right, is where people should look for that?

H: Penn State University Press, yes. Thank you.

D: All right. Well, thank you so much again for all your work on these episodes, Derek. It's been great to collaborate with you, and whether it's podcasting or otherwise, I'll look forward to continuing that collaboration in the future.

H: Absolutely. Love being here, love doing this, and thanks. Thanks, Eric.

D: Thank you.

[elevator chime sound effect]

D: Hello once more, listeners. Before we get to the interview itself, I'm hopping back in here solo to offer a quick introduction to this episode's interviewee. Keith Gilyard is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of English and African American Studies at Penn State University. He formerly was a member of the faculty at Syracuse University and at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York. He served as Thomas R. Watson Visiting Distinguished Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisville and as Presidential Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Oklahoma. The author of twenty-four books, his works include the education memoir *Voices of the Self* (1991), *Composition and Cornel West* (2008), *On African American Rhetoric* (with Adam Banks, 2018), biographies of John Oliver Killens (2011) and Louise Thompson Patterson (2017), the novella *The Next Great Old-School Conspiracy* (2015), and the poetry collections *Impressions* (2021) and *On Location* (2023). Gilyard is a former Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication and former president of the National Council of Teachers of English. He is the recipient of two American Book Awards, the CCCC Exemplar Award, the NCTE Distinguished Service Award, and the RSA Cheryl Geisler Award for Outstanding Mentor. I also want to give a quick word of acknowledgement to Mudiwa Pettus and D'Angelo Bridges, two of Gilyard's mentees who were on hand for this interview.

[Plushgoolash's "Super Glue" plays]

H: All right. I am Derek G. Handley, Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I'm in the office of the esteemed Professor Keith Gilyard. The office is also known as "Barbershop 2." How did it get the name the Barbershop, and the original Barbershop, how did that come about?

Keith Gilyard [G]: The original Barbershop, that was a group of students who were here in the early—I would say beginning in the late '90s, when I first came to Penn State. I came to Penn State in '99, okay, and so at that time, you know, I was active in recruiting because we were going into an emphasis in cultural rhetorics, which I had done at Syracuse, and so we managed to recruit a remarkable group of students who just happen to come at the same time. And so my office became the gathering place for them, and that just became the Barbershop. And Vorris Nunley was one of them, so of course his interest was in hush-harbor rhetoric and rhetoric of black barbershops and whatnot, and so it just was the hangout place with Adam Banks, Vorris, Howard Ramsby. So it just became the Barbershop. We've had a renovation since then. I used to be down on the first level, and now I'm up here in the so-called penthouse, right?

H: It is the penthouse, for our listeners. [Gilyard laughs] Has a wonderful view.

G: It's not as crowded as the original Barbershop was. But yeah, I guess Barbershop 2 would be the name of it. I have a blog called the *Language Lane*. If I'm not mistaken that was my first entry on the blog. It was about the formation of the Barbershop, you know, and chicken night. We used to have—not only did we have the Barbershop, but we had, down at the Corner Room on College Avenue—you probably passed by there during this visit—they used to have all-you-can-eat chicken on Monday nights, so that used to be the other spot we used to meet. We used to go down there eleven, twelve deep. We used to roll eleven, twelve deep down to there and eat. You know, I don't want to get into the stereotypes about how much chicken we ate. But really, you didn't really eat that much chicken. You just ate a normal amount because the conversation was the thing. And so we had chicken night, Barbershop, went from Barbershop to chicken night, and now Barbershop 2.

H: So to keep it going, you know, this is sort of full circle for me. When I first began this journey in rhetoric, I came out here and spoke to you. We sat in your office for like an hour, and I remember thinking this was the most wonderful conversation because at that time, I was, like, real big on Ralph Ellison and *Invisible Man*. And you really centered me to, like, take a stronger look at James Baldwin. You were talking about, even before—seems like everybody talks about James Baldwin.

G: That's resurfaced now. Everybody wants to write a letter to their nephew.

H: Right, right. But even before all that, and because I was familiar with some of his work, so I took that away. And I definitely took a closer look, and Baldwin is just awesome. Well, I'm excited to be here. You were requested by popular demand from

the last podcast that I guest hosted, and so the round table, they said, "You gotta get Doc," as Ersula [Ore] would say. Superman, if you will. I used the analogy of the last group, of the roundtable, sort of like the Avengers. Now I'm mixing my comic book universes. Don't come at me, y'all! So I'm here with Superman. So I want to begin—

G: I'm in the Justice League.

H: Yeah, you're in the Justice League. [both chuckling] Right, well, it's a multiverse. Maybe there's a universe where they both intermingle. So tell us a little bit more about your educational journey, and when did you know that this was the—you know, African American rhetoric, that this is the path that you wanted to pursue, and share with us any struggles you had along the way.

G: Well, the path probably chose me, you know. As you might know, I was born in Harlem in the early 1950s, and I came of age in the 60s, you know, out in Queens. But from the very beginning, I was always a sucker, as I say, for crafted language—you know, just the language that was in the air, in the streets, in the beauty parlor, in the barber shop, stuff like that. So I always gravitated toward that. You know, everybody responds to the language around them, but it seemed I had a heightened sense of it growing up. And so my interests were literary, really. Early on, if you look at my school records, they note that, you know, "He's very interested in writing poetry," and I didn't even realize that until I was doing research and went back into the school records and realized they had noted that. I knew that, you know, I liked to scribble poems and whatnot, but they noticed that. So it's mostly a literary path. I didn't know anything about rhetoric, wouldn't have known what the word "rhetoric" was if you'd have said it back then. And so my path was that through school, and then around late teens I started taking poetry writing more seriously, and I was in workshops at the Langston Hughes Library out in Queens. And then went to Columbia, you know, I went to the MFA program at Columbia University. I thought maybe that might lead to a teaching career, but I was wrong about the value of the MFA, you know. And so at that time—this is, we're talking mid-70s now—CUNY, City University of New York, is going to an open-admissions model, and the demographics are changing, and so there was much in the way of opportunity in terms of teaching composition, okay? Which, again, I hadn't understood as a formal field. It was just writing, you know? And so I got into teaching that way, as an adjunct. My first appointment was at LaGuardia Community College, sort of in the shadow of the 59th Street Bridge. Or on our side of the bridge, we call it the Queensboro Bridge. So I started there, and I was working in a program at York College on the other side of the borough, and so that's really how I started in academe.

H: Okay.

G: And that was January 1980, 43 years now.

H: So what was that process to those steps from the community college?

G: Well, when I was at the community college, as I said, I was working at this program at York College. I think it's "special programs," they called it. And actually our boss was Regina Peruggi, I think is the way her name is now, but she's actually the first wife of Rudy Giuliani.

H: Oh!

G: She was our boss out there. So I was there for a little while, then I decided to go to grad school. I was a father by then; I wasn't going to leave New York. And so at that time, what you see now in terms of the proliferation of rhetoric programs and whatnot—that didn't exist back then. And again, I wouldn't have been thinking in terms of rhetoric anyway.

H: Right.

G: So when I was teaching at LaGuardia, a colleague, Marian Arkin, she was a graduate of the English education program at NYU, and so she said, "Keith, you need to go there, you need to go and go into the doctoral program." And so it was Marian who led me to the doctoral program. And so I went there, and it was an English education program with an emphasis on applied linguistics, composition, teaching, stuff like that. And Patricia Stock edited a book, which I'm in, which talks about composition's roots in English education because I think that if you look at a lot of the things that came out in the field of composition, a lot of that comes out of people who were in English ed programs.[1] I wrote an essay about this, as a matter of fact. There are people, they say rhetoric is the mother of composition. You know, people like Victor Villanueva, they say stuff like that. I said, for me, composition's mother is education. It's not the field of rhetoric. Rhetoric is our oldest discipline, to be sure, but in terms of the American academy, it's not the mother of composition studies. Not in my view. So again, that'll make for a good debate, but I came through the field of English education. It's interesting, because if you look at—I remember right here at the conferences, as a matter of fact, where we were looking at the people who were known names in composition studies at that time, and we were looking at what those people got their doctorates in, none of them were in writing studies.

H: Yeah.

G: They weren't in writing studies. You go back and look at the dissertations of David Bartholomae or Peter Elbow, they're not dissertations in composition studies, you know. My dissertation is about language and education, so I said that writing studies came out of English education to a great extent. I think I was maybe a decade beyond grad school when I took on the identity, maybe, of a rhetorician, or thought about it that

[1] Stock's collection is titled *Composition's Roots in English Education*.

way. I heard people say that stuff, but that really didn't apply to me. I never took a rhetoric course, so I didn't think about it that way, and it wasn't until I got to Syracuse and I was working with Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Jim Zebroski, Jim Comas, people like that whose focus was on rhetoric—even though Louise wrote about composition as well—that I saw this rhetoric identity. And by then, you started having other programs, PhD programs in rhetoric. You can go here and you can enroll in the rhetoric program and stuff like that. I think that stuff started blossoming by then, and so that's really how I got into the field. So for me, it was just making my way around my interests, merging them, because I never left any aspect of my interests behind. Matter of fact, I remember when I went to Syracuse, Louise was worried about it. She said, "Now Keith, you're not going to be up here spending all your time writing poems, are you?" I said, "No, Louise." [both laugh]

H: Were you still writing, were you still publishing—

G: Still do. Got a book coming out this year

H: Okay. So I said, "No, Louise, I'm really going to be trying to do research and scholarship in writing studies. Trust me." But that was sort of the path. The struggle really was to figure out how to, you know, keep all that merged. And you're gonna lose some of it, something has to give, but you're trying to find a way to be legible in different publishing ecologies. And so that's sort of a struggle, because I remember when I published *Voices of the Self* back in '91, a lot of people didn't even know what to do with it because I wrote it, really, as a book for educators, like, for an English education audience. I didn't have any idea that composition was gonna snatch the book and say that it was exemplary of memoir or autoethnography and stuff like that. And then it was after that, like I said, up at Syracuse when I was hanging out with people who self-identified as rhetoricians that I adopted that identity.

H: Was your dissertation at NYU, was it on African American language?

G: Actually, *Voices of the Self* was the basis of the dissertation, so it was this autoethnography and this explanation of trying to—again, I was always blurring genres, or blending genres, you know, however you want to look at it—but it was this notion of looking at an autobiographical narrative and seeing what lessons for language were in there, for language teaching were in that narrative, specifically related to African American English.

H: Okay, I see.

G: So I was in the field from grad school, not a literary scholar. I love literature, but not as a literary scholar trying to pass as a composition scholar. So I wasn't that. In a way, I look back and I see that as a model for today. I think that part of what's happened over the years is that we've become too specialized, I think, in the field. I think there

are people that their interests—you know, they have very intriguing projects, but I believe that those professional identities are too narrow now, for the most part when I look around.

H: Can you give me an example?

G: Like, you'll run into people now, and they will self-identify as a rhetorician. And then, for example, if I'm thinking expansively about African American culture, they identify as rhetoricians, then if you start asking about novels and playwrights and short story writers and all this other kind of stuff, they don't even have that background anymore. I mean, I've had students that didn't know about Langston Hughes. I said, "I can't imagine you coming up as a scholar in Black language and you don't know the work of Langston Hughes," or some of the work, you know? So I think it's some of that.

H: Do you think institutions—I mean, we kind of put folks in these disciplinary lanes.

G: I think the institutions have something to do with it, yeah.

H: I mean, there was a time when literature was frowned upon, being used first-year courses.

G: Oh, yeah. They call it the Lindemann-Tate debate or the Tate-Lindemann debate?

H: Yeah.

G: I never was in that debate because, to me, it was always—remember, I had already read Wayne Booth. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* exploded the whole idea of this great divide between the literary and the rhetorical, so I never was in that debate.

H: That's one of the things I liked about the program here at Penn State: there wasn't that separation between African-American literature—

G: But it was! But it was, between composition studies and rhetoric. Not with me.

H: That's what I'm saying, with you.

G: But I remember when I came here, it's like, there was some people who—a former department head, for example, said that, you know, "Don't encourage students to do dissertations in composition because there's no future," like, "there's no future in that." And I was like, "Man, you must—why'd you bring me here?" [chuckles] So the thing is, I think there's more specialization now. You don't—it doesn't need to be that way.

H: I see.

G: So like, when I think about scholars—like, I think about people like Carmen Kynard, for example. She seems to me to be old school in the sense that she has literature chops and writing studies chops, rhetoric chops as well as being astute politically. So I think that that's a model. But I think she's sort of a maybe almost the last of a breed who is expansive across subdisciplines like that. So I'd like to see more of that.

H: I'm just curious for you as to when did you start using the term "African American rhetoric" for what you were doing? Was that at Syracuse or was it—

G: Yeah, probably at Syracuse.

H: Okay.

G: Probably at Syracuse, African American rhetoric, cultural—because we introduced the PhD program in cultural rhetorics. I was the head of the program when we brought that on board at Syracuse, and so I think African American rhetoric—but probably not then, probably somewhere just picked it up in the literature. People didn't necessarily say African American rhetoric, but they were saying Black rhetoric and stuff like that way back in the '60s.

H: Yeah, yeah.

G: You know, we look at look at the early work of Molefi Asante, for example, who was publishing under the name Arthur Smith back then, he was writing books about Black rhetoric. There were anthologies of Black rhetoric that were published in the early '70s, late '60s and early '70s. And so I think it wasn't a moment of epiphany where you said, "Well, African American rhetoric is the term." I think in the general transition in the overall culture from Black to Afro-American to African American, I think it just fell into those spaces. So like I said, I don't think it was any particular moment of enlightenment—"Ah, it's African American rhetoric!" It wasn't that. We had books on Black rhetoric going way back.

H: Yes. I remember when I first started thinking about the field—

G: It's that book right there. It's the [Elaine] Richardson and [Ronald] Jackson book.[2]

H: Right, yeah, looking at your bookshelf. So yeah, that was very helpful for me being that you were very well aware of the history. Oftentimes we'll see, you know, folks might think they're doing something new, but there's some historical connection to it.

G: That's what the guy told the guy in *Baby Boy*. He said, "Oh, you think you're doing something new, but it ain't nothing but a rerun to me." You know, it was Ving Rhames.

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[2] *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*.

H: I didn't see that movie, but I like that.

[both laughing]

G: "Ain't nothing but a rerun to me."

H: You know, but that's one of my fears too. One of my fears is like, I might be doing something new, but someone might have already done it before.

G: No, they didn't do it your way though.

H: Okay.

G: They didn't do it your way. They can't do it your way. There's only one Derek Handley. And so you do it with your twist on it, and if they're doing something that you're doing—you know, my students have heard me say this a lot, man: it just makes the community bigger. Because they get that fear: "Oh, I'm doing this, somebody else is working on it." I say, "Good. I'm glad they're working on it. I hope they work on it. I hope you folks get published at the same time, and I hope you're in an omnibus review in the *New York Times* or something," say, "Hey, these three books came out on this subject," you know. So yeah, never worry about that, "Somebody's doing what I'm doing." They can't. There's no way.

H: That's a good point. Thank you. Thank you for that. And looking at the number of books you have published, and just your amount of publishing in general, can you share with me your writing process? I'm very curious about that: the writing process and where and how do you write?

G: It's changed over time. You know, if I had to put it under a broad category, it's just really just an obsessive-compulsive process. I try to be more scheduled and stuff like that, but it actually doesn't work out. When I get obsessed with something, then I'm just on it, you know, almost night and day. I just don't have the stamina that I used to have. When I was younger, it would be nothing for me, let's say, to put in a 15-hour writing session.

H: Continuous?

G: Yeah, yeah. Bathroom break, you know, and that. It would be nothing for me to, like, start at 9 in the morning and write to midnight. I did that a lot even when I got a little older. My children can tell you stories about, I put them in the bed and then I would sit at the table in the dining room. That's back when personal computers had just come out. I had a little Apple IIc, and I used to be at the dining room table with my IIc and I would put them to bed, and then they would come down in the morning because

they were waking up to go to school and I'd be in the same spot. And Camilla would be looking around like, "Daddy didn't move! He didn't move. We know we got a good night's sleep, and he's still at the table." [both laugh] So yeah, I used to write till sunup. That's really been the process in terms of the character of it. In terms of the specifics, it's changed some because of technology.

H: Yes.

G: And I would say that word processing technology has changed the composing process for me. And it should, because everything that the brain interacts with changes it.

H: Right, right.

G: People, you know, they speculate about that all the time: is this going to change this or that? Of course it's going to change it. You know, everything the brain interacts with changes it, modifies it in some way. It's like, for literacy, there was a sort of choice made as a species—for some parts of the species, anyway—to become literate. So for literacy, you had to pay a high price. You know, for literacy, you give up the ability to do a whole lot of stuff that some other beings in nature can do. Like, how many different trees can you identify? You know, most people, maybe five: oak, palm, whatever. But you got animals that distinguish between hundreds. You can't do that because you decided to give some of your brain to literacy, so you can't do all that other kind of stuff.

H: Right.

G: So I'm thinking about how word-processing technology influences composing processes, but particularly mine, because I know I don't write the same way because—like, we're taping. Imagine if we were doing this interview and it had to be one take, for real. It'd be a little different.

H: Yes. Yeah.

G: But when you got an erase button, edit button, you proceed differently. So I think the same thing with writing: knowing that you got word-processing programs, that you can edit, move stuff around, cut and paste, do all that other kind of stuff, I think it changes the way you even go about composing. Because I think back to grad school—you might have had the same experience—where we used to have these exams, even in undergrad, we used to have these exams, and they used to give you blue books. You have your little blue books, and then you had the exam and you had certain amount of time, and as soon as you got them blue books, you opened them up, you start filling them up, and you did it. If somebody gave me those blue books today, I'd just be like, "Man, I don't even know what to do with this." It's like, I need to draft, I need to play

around on the screen and all, move things around. So that whole linear performance—I mean, not that I couldn't do it, but I'd have to train to do that now, to do that linear performance. So technology has changed the composing process, I would imagine even in poetry. It used to be, when I first started going on the computer, I had to write all poems out by hand. It was something about the hand and the brain that I had to do. Then eventually I got to the point where I could compose right on the screen.

H: Okay.

G: And I know a number of poets who still can't do that. They still have to—it's a hand-brain thing they have to do. So processes develop and morph over time, but I would say the character the basic character of what I do is still obsessive-compulsive, which is not what I recommend for anybody. Like, anybody talks to me, I say a regular routine is a good idea. I just don't do it. I can't do it. Tried it! It just doesn't work too well for me.

H: Out of the books that you've published, what would you say was—which one was the most difficult? I'm thinking maybe ideas that you were sorting through or—

G: I think the two—actually, I think the biographies are the hardest. Biography is a hard genre. The rest of what I've done, either it's been expressive, creative-slash-expressive, or it's been polemical. You know, I've had an argument that I wanted to make, and I just like started tracing through the argument with examples and stuff. Like, that's more comfortable. But when you have a biography, you're partly at the mercy of the archive, and if there gaps in the archive, there are gaps in how you can put this narrative together. And you're like, "Well, I wish I could talk to this person about this. That would clarify that point." But that person is no longer among the living, so you're not going to. [chuckles] If you didn't leave the documents behind, now what do you do? So I found those projects, the biography projects, to be the most difficult to actually do.

H: I've worked on some historical projects. My book is a rhetorical history, and you see something in the archive, you want to know more, and there's nothing there.

G: [laughs sympathetically] You have my blessing.

H: Right? It's like, they talk about it, but you can't see it.

G: So what you have now is you have—and this is a great debate in the field of history now, of course, between how much can you be creative with historical accounts? Like, historians are really debating this furiously now. Some have this very strict standard that if it's not objectively verifiable [hits table], whatever that means, you can't count it as history. And some people are saying, "No, you have to be more creative when you see these gaps."

H: You have to try to fill it.

G: And it has to be good enough. You know, Jackie Royster talks about this. She talks about doing good-enough history. Now, if a better explanation comes along, good. They say, "Well, you know, the way Handley had it at that point, we have more information now." That's fine, good. But I think that you probably do have to take some kind of creative license to fill in those gaps or else what are you going to be left with? That's what I see as a difficulty in that kind of work—biography work, historical work, and whatnot—is the archives. For example, we just read recently Maryemma Graham's biography of Margaret Walker. Wonderful book. And then we realized that Margaret Walker left hundreds—I ain't even talking about a dozen—she left hundreds, literally hundreds of diaries behind.

H: Wow!

G: I mean, so you got an archive like that, it's like, that's another problem. I had too much stuff, you know? Probably contributed to the fact that it took Maryemma twenty years to write that book, But for me, as a researcher, that's a blessing to have an overabundance of material. I'd rather work with that than try to work with scarcity, even though it might be time-consuming and all, you got to process all that. But at least you got it.

H: Are you working on anything now?

G: Oh, you know, I always got a couple of balls up in the air. As you mentioned earlier, I got this new volume of poems on the way out with Third World Press. Then I try to keep up my blog. I know that's old school, but I try to get some entries in there. I have a couple of great guests that come on the *Language Lane*, like Mudiwa Pettus, and whatnot. She's given me a couple of pieces, and so we keep that going. You should check it out: keithgilyard.com. Then, you know, a number of people have been talking about memoir stuff, which I've always resisted because I don't really want to talk about my life that way. But then I've gotten to the point where I'm sort of thinking in the Stephen Dedalus, James Joyce kind of mindset, that if you sort of just do *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, or portrait of the rhetorician as a young man, or portrait of the writing studies scholar as a young man, maybe you could do something like that. So I started sketching some of that, and some of that involves a reworking of some of the memoir chapters of *Voices of the Self*, you know. I think this will be from a different angle. I'm working on that, then I'm also helping an old friend of mine write his memoir. He lives down in South Carolina. The problem is he has a problem with collaborative work. You know, when you say "sweep," everybody don't want to sweep at the same time, so collaborations are hard because you have to have the same pace and same drive of someone that's working on a project. And I'm like, "This is your story." I give him assignments and, you know, he's a little slow on the return. But I'm

working on that. A couple of things in the back of my mind: I was thinking about a project about Malcolm X and his representation in different genres, akin to what Trudier Harris did in her book on Martin Luther King, Jr.[3] She looked at Martin, and she looked at his representation in different genres—what the poets said with Martin. So in other words, it's almost like the rhetorical Malcolm in a sense.

H: Okay.

G: Where you have Malcolm, what does he represent in these different genres and what's the rhetorical significance of that representation. So I'll probably talk it out real well, probably never even write this book, but it's something that's in the back of my mind, especially as we come up on the 100th anniversary of his birth. So it's just something I've been thinking about.

H: One of my favorite books of yours—unfortunately, I don't know why it doesn't get talked about a little bit more—but your book with Cornel West. I really enjoy that.

G: I appreciate that.

H: I've taught it in several scenarios. And you talk about it in the introduction, but could you just say a little bit more about how that came about, and how long did it take you to write it?

G: Sure. Let me see. I think it took 45 days, or 50 days, something like that.

H: Was that another one of those all-night writing sessions?

G: Oh, no. That was more—now, it's funny because that was more disciplined. That was a more disciplined thing. What happened was Cornel West spoke here the same time—I think it was the same day—that I came down for a campus visit. He was speaking on campus that evening, so whatever the itinerary was, we obviously revised it because I was going to the Cornel West lecture. And I had flown down, so it just so happens that the next morning we were on the same flight out to Philadelphia, and so we were seated next to one another on the plane, and we just started—we're up in the air and he asked me what I did, and I said, "you know, I'm gonna say I do composition." I know if I say rhetoric, he'll want to start talking about Plato and all that stuff, which I know he knows about. I'm going to say composition and let that be my professional identity, and he didn't really know what that was. Anyway, but we started having a conversation, and then by the time we landed in Philly, he was inviting me, "You got to come to Boston, I got to take you out for a drink," all that kind of stuff. So he's been a great guy over the years after I met him that first time. Actually, I used to see him before that. He used to speak at The House of the Lord Pentecostal Church—I

[3] *Martin Luther King Jr., Heroism, and African American Literature*.

think that's the right title—on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, Reverend Daughtry's church. Back then when he spoke, there'd be maybe 35, 40 people in the audience, which is different from the way you think about his audiences now. But anyway, after that plane ride, I wrote an introduction to that book, I started thinking about, like, he was unaware of composition, but by then he had been cited by compositionists a lot in the scholarship. So I said he was really unaware of his actual impact on the field, and so that's when I started thinking about, you know, maybe I'll do something on him in that vein. So then that's when I taught a seminar with Elaine Richardson. We did a Cornel West/bell hooks seminar.

H: Oh, wow.

G: Some of the days she would be leading, some days I'd be leading, and I was taking notes. And then I just forgot about it for a while, and then I pitched it to Southern Illinois University Press. They were interested in the idea, but then I was doing other stuff because I was always working on more than one project. I borrowed this from John Oliver Killens because he always worked on multiple projects, and the reason he did it was that it was his insurance against writer's block, because he felt that as he got blocked on something, he could turn something else. So I never had writer's block because if I did feel blocked on something, I just turned to another project. So the Cornel West project, that just languished for a while. I wasn't really worried about it. I was doing other stuff. And then I remember being at CCCC in Chicago, and we were in the Palmer House sitting at the bar with the editor from the press, and he was like, "Well, when do you want this book to come out?" And I was saying, "Oh, man, the book should come out by"—I forget what date. I said, "It'd be nice if it came out by then." He said, "Well, if it's going to come out then, I need to have it by this date," and this, that, and the other. Because I wasn't even thinking about a date. I wasn't thinking about the process. And he said, "Well, if it's going to come out then, I need it by this date." And I was like, "Well, if you need it by this date, then I need to get started." [chuckles]

H: You got to get started with it.

G: And so what I did, I said that you're going to break from my normal pattern. You have to go in the office and you going write a thousand words in the office, and you can't leave campus till you write those thousand words a day. I did a thousand words a day for about 45 or 50 days, and that was it. So yeah, people think I'm joking when I say it took 45 days or 50. That's about what it took. But I had developed an archive, you know. To give you the fuller picture, Vorris Nunley was my research assistant during those days, and even when I wasn't working on the project, I was telling Vorris, [bumping table for emphasis] "Anything that you see in the literature, anything with Cornel West's name on it, just get that in the stockpile." So we had created an archive, like, all these different articles and all these different places where he had been cited

and written about and all. So I had all that in the office, I had the archive in the office, and then it was just a question of, you got to do this daily routine until you're done.

H: So Cornel West knows about composition now.

G: Yeah. Well, what happened when I finished—as you know from reading the book—when I finished my part of it, I went over to Princeton to interview him. Because the book started with our encounter on the plane, I told him I wanted to finish the book with a conversation, with an interview with him. And so he said, "Come on over to Princeton," so I went over. We did that. But I told him, I said, "I'm only going to do the interview if you read the book." I said, "You ain't going to be playing with my stuff and not going to read the book and come trying to get through an interview," I said. So he said "fine." So he read the book, we had to interview, and it's funny because after that, he actually wanted to come to the Cs. He said, "Yeah, get your people, talk to your people, and maybe you and I we could do a joint thing," and stuff like that.

H: That would've been awesome!

G: Yeah, but you know, he called me—matter of fact, he called me from the airport, he was in Japan, and said, "Yeah, we should do this!" But Corn, you know, he got a thousand things, and so it never it never really happened. But it would have been fun.

H: Yes. I've noticed—and I don't have anything to back this up, but it seems like the word "composition," people now say "writing studies." Have you noticed that?

G: Yeah, yeah.

H: Is there any reasoning behind that, do you think? Or is it just another way to get removed from the word composition?

G: I don't really know. I see writing studies, some people say rhetoric/composition/writing studies—slash slash, they use the slash. Or rhetoric/composition/literacy studies. I don't have a problem with it. I mean, it's okay with me. I don't really know the motive. It seems to me, if I had to guess, that it has to do with achieving more cache for the work that people are doing because composition—I think when you look at traditional English departments, composition is sort of been a stepchild in those departments. And so like I said, I've been at conferences with people—I don't want to name names—but people that puffed out their chest like, "What do you do?" And I'd be like, "Well, you know, I'm in composition studies," that's all." "Oh, I'm a *rhetorician*," you know. So I think that the move to writing studies and stuff like that, I think that's a cache sort of move. But I don't have a problem with it. I don't have a problem with the term, you know. And I never mind being called a compositionist. I never have a problem with that. So you know, I work it either way.

H: Where do you see the state of the field now—African American rhetoric, is there a direction you would like to see it go?

G: Well, I'm not prescriptive that way, so I don't think there's a particular direction I would like to see it go—except for what I see it just becoming more diverse, you know? It's hard for me to even say. I don't think any one person nowadays can talk about the state of the field. It used to be a time when, you know, I remember decades ago you could try to. You could sort of stay on top of all the different scholarship that came out.

H: Yeah.

G: You can't even do that now. Like, you have to be within networks, and your networks have to be in the network for you to hear about different stuff that's coming out and whatnot. So I just think the field is getting more and more varied. I just came from overseas, as a matter of fact. I was in Little Africa in Paris. I was in Matongé, which is an African neighborhood in Brussels, which is named after a district in Kinshasa, and I'm walking by a barbershop. I mean, you could see the red, white, and blue pole—it was just like if you're walking down the street in in Brooklyn or something like that. And I'm like, I thought about Vorris, I said, "Man, we should be in the barbershop over here in Matongé," you know? [H chuckles] Looking at, trying to figure out the rhetorical discourse and all that kind of stuff that's going on. I also was in Brixton, which is a Black neighborhood in London, listening to that. So I think that a lot of people, they're more interested in sort of Transatlantic things now. There used to be a time—I remember back when I was in grad school, even, you had books that came out of British Black English and stuff like that. I haven't really seen those type of books. I haven't been looking the same way, admittedly, but I haven't really seen those types of studies in recent years. But I think Mudiwa is involved in something now with a scholar from Europe, so I think that you're going to see some more of that. I think you're going to see more of that over time. So that's one direction, I think, for the field.

H: There was a special issue in *RSQ* that I think recently received honorable mention for best articles in *RSQ*: "Global Black Rhetorics."

G: Okay. Yes. I think you're going to see more of that. Especially when people—like, to me, to read it in *RSQ* is one thing, but then to jump on plane and be in these different communities, it's like, "Yes. Yes. I hear it. I hear it. I see it." Yeah.

H: One thing that you pointed out in your book *On African-American Rhetoric*, you and Adam [Banks] call for more to be done intersecting with African-American rhetoric and visual rhetoric, and I've started to see some research around that happening.

G: Yeah, yeah. I remember when we talked about that book, you were here. Remember, we had the conference.

H: Yes, Camp Rhetoric.

G: Camp Rhetoric. Yeah, you were here, and Adam and I were talking about it. I remember that.

H: So I got to see the origins.

G: That was the genesis, no doubt.

H: And you all were working it through, and then, what, 15 minutes later, y'all wrote a book?

[both laugh]

G: That's the joke around here. Sometimes some of the people that work here, they like to get together on Fridays, and they ask if I did another book this week. You know, that kind of stuff. So great exaggeration obviously, but, you know.

H: I don't know. I start to feel—thinking about your production, I start to feel inadequate. It's like, "Okay, it's taking me this long for the dissertation to the book?"

G: No, but the thing is you always—the whole thing is just to sing your song the best you can sing it. It's not a foot race. It's not a contest. It's like, can you do what you're called to do or what you feel called to do and do that to the best of your ability? And that's it. Because everybody has, you know, we have different things going on, and you can't account for all the things that people are dealing with. You know, I have models. I was always chasing Geneva Smitherman, for example, and every time I did something, she did something else, and I was like, "Damn, I'm never going to catch up." So she was always my model of an engaged scholar, mentor. So that's who I was chasing from the moment I read *Talkin and Testifyin*. And then there was—I think it was the Boston convention of NCTE one November, I got on the bus because I'd heard that Geneva Smitherman was going to be at the convention. So I got on the bus and went from New York to Boston—

H: Wow.

G: —and went to that session. And she was on that session, and you know at the end, you present and whatnot, then session's over, crowd's mingling, I just barged up to the front. [both laugh] I said I hadn't come all the way to Boston not to meet Geneva. So I barged up to the front and got a chance to meet her. And then you had an organization, the Black Caucus—so she was active in the Black Caucus anyway, so in the program you saw where the Black Caucus was meeting, so I went to the Black Caucus meeting. So that's actually how I got involved in the NCTE, four Cs Black

Caucus, and that's how I met Geneva. She tells a different story, but I tell her her memories off.

H: So would you say she was your biggest scholarly influence?

G: Geneva? Yeah, for sure. But of course, I mean, when you ask about influences, you never get it right because you never know everything that influenced you or what comes out.

H: What about your creative writing? Who were you really looking up to?

G: Well, you know, I come up during the Black Arts period, so those poets. I remember sitting in the Langston Hughes Library reading all the books that came out of Broadside Press. You know, Haki Madhubuti was someone that I read. A lot of people were reading [Amiri] Baraka then. I read Baraka, but Haki was my guy when I was reading back then. But then of course Nikki [Giovanni], Sonia [Sanchez]. And a lot of these writers came to the library, so I met them. Like, I met Jayne Cortez, I met Nikki Giovanni, I met these people when I was a teenager. But the influence—what I was trying to actually be like was Pablo Neruda, which is impossible because you ain't going to be Neruda. But just the surrealism of Neruda—because, you know, I wasn't used to that kind of language. So Neruda and Vallejo, César Vallejo, the great poet also. Those are poets that I was reading and that I started reading. But then other stuff too, like [Walt] Whitman. You know: "Resist much, obey little." [laughs] T. S. Eliot, even. I remember being in undergrad when I read "unreal city, unreal city." I said, "That's a line of poetry? You could just put 'unreal city' twice and that's a line?" [H chuckles] I said, "Wow. So this is different." This is different from the older stuff. And so yeah, the thing with any kind of artistic endeavor, you have these influences. In some ways they overdetermine what you do at certain points, and then you try to work through all that to try to get your own voice, in a sense. You have to kind of do what Whitney Houston had to do. Like, "Whitney, stop sounding like everybody else." Got to try to find out what Whitney sounds like.

H: Find your voice.

G: Yeah, that kind of stuff. Could say the same about Beyoncé too, but I ain't going to get into that. [chuckles]

H: Uh oh. See, we gonna cut that out. [G laughs] Well, since we began this interview a couple of your former students have walked into the room to listen.[4]

G: Barbershop 2. I told you.

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[4] I.e., Mudiwa Pettus and D'Angelo Bridges.

H: Barbershop 2, we're all in the barbershop. Can you share with us What's the best way to mentor graduate students?

G: You might want to ask them that, because I have a perspective as a mentor. Obviously they're mentees, so they have a sense of what works best for them. But I think that institutions can be alienating places.

H: Yeah.

G: Like, I teach at an institution here at Penn State which is not like the institutions that I attended. I barely roamed beyond the boundaries of New York City until I was in my 40s, you know. So it's a different place. You come to a place out here in middle of cornfields, so to speak, and your African American students—I don't only have African American students, but I've had a number of them—and institutions like this can be alienating, especially for people, the first-generation doctoral students and stuff like that, even wondering about sticking it out and investing four, six years in the doctorate and whatnot. So the main thing I can do is be available, I think, and try to paint a picture of what the possibilities are for them. Like, you can't tell you what to do, but what is it that you aspire to do. And I just try to fit in around those declarations and try to see how I can be available. And then part of it is I try to model. Like, I used to tell some students—they would tell you—I said, "Don't let me write a book while you're here." And they would say, "Man, we trying to do a dissertation and he writing another book." So you try to be a model because part of what happens is that when your students go into the field, their work with you—or their degree, actually—can appreciate based on the work you do. So if you are not being a model for scholarly production, that could affect them down the line too because it's like, "Well, where did you go to school?" But if you're productive, then it's like, "Oh, you were there with so and so" and whatnot. So that's one thing, is serve as a model. I don't ask students to do anything I wouldn't do myself, or haven't done. So I don't try to put unreasonable demands on them. I think the main thing is availability. And like I said, the metaphor that we use, like the barbershop, chicken night, those are all things that I just try to do to construct ethos, build certain kind of solidarity and just encourage, build community, encourage them in their work. Clear the path, because there's some obstacles and hurdles that you have to negotiate in institutions, so if you can sort of be a point person, sometimes just explaining to other scholars the worth of particular projects because a lot of scholars, they come from different orientations—it might be called old school or something. And students are proposing something and they don't even see that as—"that's not really scholarship, that's not a viable project." So sometimes you just have to intercede and say, "No, don't worry, I got this. I got this student, this project. I'm signing off on this project." And so you have to do that, and in some ways you're their defender all the way through the dissertation. You make sure that they got to deal with some obstacles and some tough questioning and stuff like that, but you just have to have their back on all that kind of stuff. I haven't codified it in terms of the methodology, but those are just thoughts. That's the sort of things I try to do.

H: Okay. It's tradition for this podcast to have the guest being interviewed to ask a question for the next guest to answer. So Jennifer LeMesurier from Colgate University asked

[clip from previous episode]

LeMesurier: What makes for good academic leaders?

[clip ends]

H: And you were an NCTE president, I'm pretty sure.

G: I was 4Cs chair as well.

H: 4Cs chair.

G: The key to me was to have good people around me. It wasn't—I don't even know if I was a good academic leader, but I think that if you assemble a good team around you, you got a good shot. I was a department head at Syracuse; I had a great staff that worked with me. At the Cs, I had a great staff, and NCTE, I had a great staff. So I think you have to—sometimes there are calls you have to make, you just have to be decisive with your calls. There was some things I did when I chaired 4Cs that weren't all that popular. I'm the one who got rid of the winter workshop, which a lot of people liked to go to in Clearwater and whatnot. And we just couldn't afford it. And so at some point, you had to make the decision to let that go. There was another case in which I remember when we were going for the Denver convention, and the Adam's Mark [hotel] chain, there had been some discrimination suits filed against Adam's Mark, and I think we were scheduled to go in there. And so fiscal responsibility is the chair's, ultimately, so it fell to the chair to make a decision as to whether we're going to pull out of the Denver convention or not. So I said, "Well, you know, if those suits persist and they're unresolved, we're going to have to. That's the only ethical thing I can think of to do." But fortunately, I didn't have to make that call because the stuff was resolved. But as you know, we've pulled out of other sites since then. It's a really, really tough decision to make. So the only thing I can think of for a leader, man, is to take—like my mother used to teach me, the best answer is the answer that takes the most things into account. You just try to think, you just try to take into account the most things you can take into account in terms of any particular decision, try to be fair, and that's all you can do. But the key: get a good staff around you because you don't lead alone.

H: Some organizations are going have to make some tough decisions about Florida, whether or not they have conventions in Florida. And I think I'll leave that alone. [both chuckle] I don't want to—I'm gonna walk up to the line and then I want to stop.

G: I think we should have the convention at Disney World, which we have done before! We have done before, you know.

H: Really?

G: Yeah, yeah. I think the Orlando convention. Yeah, the Orlando Convention, we were at Disney World. I remember walking down the block with Mickey Mouse. Yeah, no doubt.

[both laughing]

G: It's true!

H: Walking down the block with Mickey Mouse. All right. So what is your question for the next person who will be interviewed on this podcast?

G: Oh, I just want to know what that person plans to be his or her contribution to the field, and if there's any way that I could help with that. That's what I would ask. You notice the trick in there, because if the answer is yes that means I have continued relevance because the person will get in touch with me. So that's what I would ask.

H: I'm going to break tradition here and ask you one more question. What do you think your legacy is to the to the field of African American rhetoric?

G: Whew.

H: That might be an unfair question, but I'm going to ask it anyway.

G: I don't know.

H: Or what would you want people to say about you, about your legacy to the field?

G: Just that he produced a body of work that's useful. Like I tell my students sometimes, I said, "Look, I'll be in the library." Because, you know, nowadays there's, especially with the rise of the Black public intellectual and all that kind of stuff—which I sometimes call the Black publicity intellectual—there's different reasons why people get a claim in different quarters and whatnot. So I never really bothered with all that. My whole thing was the library. So I'll be in the library. When the dust settles, just be in a library. But what I would like, the main thing, the really main thing that I would like for legacy, or in terms of having people talk about legacy, is that third shelf. To me, that's the legacy right there.

H: And say what's the third shelf?

G: The third shelf, those are books written by my students. I did an interview with the *Chronicle*, which is an NCTE publication, once, and they wanted a photo, and I just held up different book covers and we just took a photo. If you get up on that shelf—like Kevin Browne is up there twice, that's Laura Gray-Rosendale, Jay Jordan, that's Adam Banks, that's Vorris Nunley, that's Howard Ramsby, Anissa Wardi, Ersula Ore. These are all dissertations that I chaired. And then we got to get Mudiwa Pettus up there, Gabriel Green, Earl Brooks has a book under contract that's going to be out next year. We got D'Angelo Bridges in the pipeline.

H: And pretty recent, Sarah RudeWalker.

G: Sarah RudeWalker up there, yeah. No doubt. This book just came out last month. So there's a legacy right there. Yeah. My shelves, top two, and then the students, the student books.

H: Wow.

G: But it's the baton. You know, I learned this from Du Bois, Killens, they considered themselves as passing the baton along. So you run your leg, and then you pass that baton on. And that's the legacy. If you ran your leg well, and the people you pass the baton on, if they're running their leg well, partly because you did your job, then that's legacy.

H: Well, I just want to say thank you for taking time out of your schedule to sit down with me. You have been a good friend and mentor to. You know, I went to an institution that didn't have any specialists in African American rhetoric, and trying to chart that path, you've been very helpful, your mentorship, and I really appreciate it, and I'm glad I got to interview Superman.

G: Yeah, all of that, but I want to see that book come out. I'm waiting on that book!

H: Okay, can I put it on that third shelf? [laughs]

G: Without a doubt! Without a doubt.

H: Can I get on the third shelf?

G: Absolutely

H: Okay

G: Absolutely.

H: Well, thanks, Keith. I really appreciate it.

G: Thank you.

[drumbeat from *Rhetoricity* theme plays]

D: Thanks for listening to this episode of *Rhetoricity*! I'll be back in a few weeks to bring you a roundtable discussion about a new open-access resource called *Teaching Students to Podcast*, a manual created by the Humanities Podcast Network for teachers who are interested in integrating podcasting into college courses. Till then, you can find me on Bluesky at ericdet.bsky.social, and you can find related podcasts via the Facebook group Podcasts in Rhetoric and Composition. The URL for that group is facebook.com/rhetcompcast. Till next time, it's a bird, it's a plane, no, it's Eric Detweiler, winding up a super episode of *Rhetoricity*.