Transcript for S2 Episode 2: Interview with Dr. Eric Darnell Pritchard
Run Time: 01:06:46

BL: B. López (host, co-executive producer)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer)
EDP: Dr. Eric Darnell Pritchard (guest)

Cue music: "RSPN" by Blank and Kytt

BL: Welcome to *This Rhetorical Life*, a podcast about radical pedagogy, counterstories of rhetoric and composition, and the rhetoricity of our personal and political lives. We're your hosts B. López…

BK: …and Ben Kuebrich.

BL: B. is a queer PhD student of color, an archival enthusiast, and a cat dad above all else.

BK: Ben is an organizer and a teacher of journalism and writing. Join us here every month as we talk with educators, scholars, and activists about their research, their classroom interventions, and their struggles for a more just world.

BL: Hey ya'll. This is B López. And today I have the honor and privilege of interviewing Dr. Eric Darnell Pritchard.

Dr. Pritchard is an award winning writer, cultural critic, and Associate Professor of English at the University of Buffalo. His first book, *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and The Politics of Literacy* won three book awards: the inaugural outstanding book award from the Conference on Community Writing, the 2018 advancement of knowledge award, and the 2019 Lavender book award for excellence in queer scholarship, both from the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

His work beautifully captures the essence of Black queer magic by highlighting the power that fashion has as a literacy. His work opens a realm of possibilities for scholars in the field of literacy, composition, and rhetoric.

In February 2019, Dr. Pritchard presented his work at Syracuse University. His lecture, "Black Supernovas: The Legacy of Black Gay Fashion Designers," called our attention to the powerful contributions of Black gay fashion designers like Patrick Kelly and more.

I'm grateful to have the opportunity to interview him about his work, his presentation, and his writing journey. Let's tune in.

BL: So, Dr. Pritchard, can you talk about your *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and The Politics of Literacy* book and the inspiration behind it?

DP: Yeah. The book was inspired, actually when I was in graduate school. I had a really deep Black queer community when I was in Madison. My best friend at the time lived in Madison and was doing some work with Black queer men through the urban league. And they would get together and gather formally in relation to the urban league group that he was facilitating but then also just get together informally and just watch *Project Runway* together, or watch videos, or whatever movie award.

And I was just so busy with school. You know, I was working at the writing center and in the evenings at the multicultural student center, and I was also working in the community at the public library, so I would miss a lot of that. And one day, I just didn't. I had a day off and I was there, and I was like: oh my gosh, I've been missing out on so much. In my own living room, you know, all this Black queer community was coming over, watching TV, kikiing, and having a good time and I was just like: I'm a part of it, but I'm not a part of it. Right?

And so for me it became really clear to me how easy, even as a Black queer person, I could miss the culture that was being created, the political work that was being created, the literacy work that's being created, just by everyday people gathering and being at the center of their own lives.

So I became really interested in that as a literacy question, as a then graduate student studying literacy and rhetorical studies. And that's what really led to fashioning lives was that there was this craving to be in community with Black queer people and to make legible to people who don't necessarily know Black queer life, culture, history, and politics how we make meaning. Why we make meaning. That's really where the work came from.

And it was really this kind of perfect mixture because I had a literacy class I was doing at the time, and then I was also doing a methods and methodology class and those two things together are what really helped me think: Okay this is how you could take these things together as a question. Take this craving you have to know more about Black queer life, history, culture, politics as a question and put it with an actual methodology, which then for the book became the interview.

That's when I initially began to think about what became *Fashioning Lives* was when I was in graduate school and it wasn't until after I graduated that I was able to really kind of go back.

So I would say initially my question was really what's the relationship between literacy and identity in the lives of Black queer people. Right? Which is a really complicated question, even though it sounds like a really simplistic question. And then *Fashioning Lives* kind of moved beyond that and began to think about like if I look at these stories that people tell me in the interviews, how do I codify these literacy practices in ways that show how the very stories that these people are telling me are theoretical in and of themselves, right? And give us not only much to

understand not only Black queer life and culture in relationship to literacy but also to understand some important ways that literacy works within and beyond Black queer communities, right? It sort of pushes on and helps us to rethink things like literacy and agency, right? Or what does it mean to look at the relationship between literacy and belonging? Or literacy and healing? Or, you know, literacy and love? And that these are all things that we have not really been attentive to in general but especially when it comes to queer people of color and, in the case of my book, Black queer people specifically.

BL: Most definitely. And I think you already started to get into this question as well about what you mentioned in your introduction about the framework for your book—what led you to solidify this framework? Because I feel like you started to for sure address that in the mainstream of the field there hasn't been a lot of attention given, so was there any pushback that you might have experienced in sharing your work? Because in my experience as a grad student of color I think that I think about that a lot and it's a lot of internal stuff I'm working on constantly, but of what other folks in the field are going to say. Or if it is legitimate enough.

I was just curious about your experience in solidifying your framework.

EDP: That's a great question. I think that in terms of solidifying my framework, one of the things that was really helpful to me in theorizing the major concepts in the book—restorative literacies, tenacious reading, literacy normativity—was one of my advisors when I was in graduate school in the Masters Program in African American studies at Wisconsin and the PhD Program in English was Nellie McKay. And for those who will be listening and don't know, Nellie McKay was a genius, incredible, African American literature and cultural scholar. She, with Henry Louis Gates, edited the Norton Anthology of African American literature and culture. It was the first collection of African American literature and culture that was this rich—the entire sort of lifespan of Black letters.

One of the things she once said in a letter to her best friend who did history at Princeton for many, many years: All these people talk about Black women being at the margins, and that's true. However, we are also at the center of our own lives. Right?

BL: Hmmm. Yeah.

EDP: And so, for me, being that my interest was in literacy, theory, and concepts that come when we say, we acknowledge that yes Black queer people might be marginalized, right? Historically, culturally, politically, socially. But they are also at the center of their own lives. So, you know, they don't need the permission of institutions or of the state, or of the dominant culture, to give some meaning to literacy and to rhetoric and what it means to them. So I wanted to know what that is. That's how I saw and see my work.

I sort of acknowledge that white supremacy is real. Right? Homophobia, transphobia, ageism, ableism—those things are real.

And yet and still, people are at the center of their own lives. And so there's something to be said for giving the epistemologies, the knowledge that they create, the values that they hold, their way of being, their ontologies, from the center of their own lives—that deserves its due. It shouldn't have to compete for attention.

So that's how I solidified the concept. Black queer people are on the margins. That's still a big part of the concept, but I just didn't allow it to eclipse that my interviewees were making meaning of literacy on their own terms. And that to me was a more profoundly interesting and exciting and fresh and new way to think of it as opposed to only thinking about how they are using literacy to respond to oppression just because oppression exists. Or how are they using it to survive. Yeah—those things are important to point out, and I do. A lot of the work speaks to that. But they also want to flourish and are flourishing and they also choose joy. And they also have their own communities, and all those things require literacy practices to do, and some that are specific to their culture and their history and their politics and who they are. That's what I wanted to focus on and solidify in my theory.

In terms of pushback, yeah, I felt like some was direct. Right? And some I anticipated. I would say that as far as challenges for me, part of it was that here I was doing this project on Black queer people as a graduate student and no one before me in literacy studies in composition and rhetoric had done that.

BL: Right.

EDP: So I didn't have a lot to lean on. I had African American literacy, which obviously has decades and decades of scholarship. And I did have queer literacy and rhetorical studies work too. There had been people who had done that work for decades, so I did have that to draw from. But not like Black queerness. And I remember talking with my advisor about wanting to do this project and she was so supportive, and so excited. But she was also really honest with me. She said that if you do this Black queer studies project, we don't know how this is going to go. Like this is so out the box and strange. People might be upset. People who do African American literacy might be offended by the fact that you're talking about how they were not attentive to sexuality or gender in these ways.

People who do queer rhetoric, who predominately in the field of composition and rhetoric, are white.

BL: Yes.

EDP: Will maybe have some issue with the fact that you're highlighting how certain things were not talked about in terms of race and ethnicity and what-have-you. So there's that to consider.

But then she was like: all of that aside there is a certain kind of comfort that many people want to have as graduate students of being like you're part of a discourse community, and you aren't. If you do this work you're not. You're it. So she said, you can do that, or you can keep doing what you're doing, which at the time I was doing a project on HBCUs because I went to a historically Black college—Lincoln University, the first, we're the oldest existing I love to always point that out. And she was like, you do that and you'd have a discourse community, people are excited about that kind of work, it's going to go great. It'll go great when you go on the market, it will go great when you try to publish a piece. I can't tell you any of these things are going to work out otherwise. She was like, by having said that, you have to decide from a place of what is going to feed you and feed your soul.

And that's why ultimately I chose the project that I chose. Because I chose the work that I didn't know what would happen, if people would like it, if it would be the kind of thing that people would think was too outside of the field to get a job, or any of those things. I followed my heart—the cliché for a reason. Right? I followed my heart. I chose the thing that brought me joy, that really excited me intellectually, and that's what I went in the direction of.

And I would say that that was not about any one individual, but the difficulty there was not really having anything to go to. That's not something that I blame the field for or anything like that because what it was was that I was supposed to do it. Right? And the other people who are doing that work now are supposed to do that. And everything happens in due time and you know with who is supposed to do it. I also am really interdisciplinary and it shows in my methodology, it shows in who and what I cite. Yes, I cite composition and rhetoric, but I love to read. So I read history, I read sociology, I read anthropology. I read really, really widely and I bring all of that into my work.

And sometimes in the field when you are disciplinary there are certain group of people in composition and rhetoric who get really antsy about that. And I don't want to make assumptions as to why, but that's been my experience. But the way I approach that is if you have a question, you have a research question, you have a thing you want to do, you have to use all the instruments and tools that the universe has given you to do it. And to me it just seems foolish to not make use of everything that's in the toolbox.

So it would have been crazy for me to have done a project on Black queer literacy and pretend that there isn't already a really vibrant and exciting Black queer theory conversation that had been happening for decades before I existed. I had to make sure that that was reflected and bring that to bear. Not necessarily just to bring that into comp/rhet but also to talk to people who do Black queer theory about what literacy, composition, and rhetoric scholars know that they don't know. Right? That's what it means to be truly interdisciplinary. It's to stand at the nexus of all these different things and say: here's where me standing from this vantage point of

this conversation, this is what I can see. These are the questions that I'm asking, and this is what my data tells me, and so to see that as a strength and not a deficit.

And lastly, I would say is that Black queer feminists preceded me in this field. So, Jackie Royster, Beverley Moss, Gwen Pough, and then also Carmen Kynard, and then people who are my peers: April Baker Bell, Tamika Carey. I have a very, very wonderful, supportive group of Black queer feminist scholars who really have either trailblazed and paved the way in their work, or are on the path with me and in community with me, and are so inspiring in their brilliance and the work that they do and what they bring to the table. And so, even with the existence of pushback, directly or indirectly in terms of not having much to sort of link to in doing the Black queer project, I always had Black feminism. And I think Black queer theorists who are being honest about where Black queer theory comes from will always say that if it were not for women of color feminism, there would not be queer of color critique. There would not be Black queer theory. José Esteban Muñoz says this in *Disidentifications*, right, that he is a Cuban, gay man made in the world through women of color feminism. And so I always felt this mixture of feeling I'm in a discourse community that is rich and exciting and supportive and all of that, and then at the same time I know my specific thing I'm going into hasn't necessarily been talked about and that's scary.

I just think that you have to do the work that you are here to do. And it's so important to follow.

BL: Definitely. Thank you so much for your answers. So beautifully said at getting at that pushback question. Just out of my own curiosity but I'm sure that other queer graduate students of color specifically might also be thinking about that same kind of pushback. I know that's something I think about a lot. Reading your work was mindblowing. Literally mindblowing. Because I'm like: What? We can do this? We can do this kind of work?

EDP: And that matters more to me than anything—anyway in which the work may be recognized. You saying that, okay: mission accomplished. Because if I didn't do anything else but this book, I wanted to be able to do that. I wanted to be able to have someone say: I wanted to do this thing that I didn't think I could do. Here's something else that doesn't seem possible either, and here it is.

Even now, working on my new project, I have to sometimes look to the right and see my own book on the shelf and say, and remind myself: Yes. What you're trying to do here seems a little wacky or out the box but trust in your instincts. Trust your intuition, trust your love, trust your joy, trust what you are here to do and keep going. So thank you for that.

BL: At your SU lecture, you had mentioned your *Nothing Is Impossible* book, and you also mentioned that you're working on another book called *If We Hold On Together: Community Literacies and Black Queer Feminist Pedagogies.*

EDP: Yes. So *We Hold On Together: Community Literacies and Black Queer Feminist Pedagogies* is a book that I'm working on that essentially is looking at Black queer feminist activists and organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, and looking at their work as a form of community literacy activism at the time.

So part of it is looking at the cultural productions that came from those organizations, so speeches and their manifestos and pamphlets and all those things. But also, fashion and buttons and signs from rallies and songs, chants, all of those kinds of cultural productions that were a part of the activist work that they did are on the table for me looking at community literacies that emerged during that time.

But also in looking at the ways that they created those things, I'm really interested in the implications of what they did. What are the implications of thinking about that for thinking about literacy, pedagogy, and rhetorical education, today? And what are the things that we can and absolutely must credit them for because many of them were teachers in actual schools and classrooms and universities and some of them were community educators, they were teaching in basements and in living rooms and on street corners, and it's also about rethinking what do we think of as the classroom to give them credit for what it is that they communicated at that time.

But also for us to think about well what is it that they saying that we missed? How can that be nurturing? How can that be sustenance as we try to think about a literacy, pedagogy, a rhetorical education today that can save our lives?

BL: Yes!

EDP: And help us to build community and ultimately to create the world we all deserve to live in, right? That's really what I think that they were doing, so I'm really loving working on this project because I consider myself to be an ancestor-led scholar, and so I spent a lot of time for this project in the archives, reading letters that Black queer feminists were writing to each other, the kind of love that they shared with one another, but also they had challenges too, right? It's hard. Community is not easy and it's not a one time event, you have to keep re-making it. Like, we have to keep wanting it.

I'm just so grateful to wake up every day, go about my rituals for my research and my writing, and sit in an archive and just read these letters and read their pamphlets and their notebooks and the things they were dreaming up, some of the things that happened and some that have yet to happen but I'm confident are emerging. So that's been really, really wonderful to do.

The project that I spoke about at Syracuse, it's my work in fashion, so I work also on fashion and rhetoric.

One of the things that I talked about in that lecture was about the legacies of Black

gay fashion designers and one of the fashion designers that I talk about was a man by the name of Patrick Kelly who was born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and who made history when he became the first American admitted to the *Chambre syndicale*, which is essentially the French version of the CFDA. Here in America we have the Council of Fashion Designers of America, the *Chambre syndicale* is essentially its equivalent in France, except for in France fashion is like a national sport, right? It's serious business.

BL: Right! (Laughs.)

EDP: So for an American to make it into that association, to be the first to do so, it was huge. And so for a Black American from the south, and he was someone who essentially took what I think was like the aesthetics of Black joy and translated that into his designs. And also he would take things, images that were created to do harm to Black people. A lot of the racist imagery that we would see in cartoons and in comics and things like that and he just had the mind that: I didn't create this, this doesn't define me, and I'm going to essentially re-appropriate it, take something that is ugly and harmful into something that is sort of a parody of it and laugh at it because it's not going to harm me and it won't harm my people.

So the book *Nothing is Impossible: The Life and Work of Patrick Kelly* is a biography of Patrick Kelly. I've been working on it since about 2013 in earnest. But I always tell people it's the book that I've been writing since I was eight years old because that's when I saw Patrick Kelly on TV for the first time and I just had this Black queer resonance with him.

I couldn't have used that language at the time but I just felt this kind of: Oh, he's interesting, in ways that I think people think of me as being different and interesting. And I've just always wanted to really say more about him and about his life and also about other Black gay designers in general.

So, yeah. I'm just again reaffirmed in this because, for example tomorrow—I guess a podcast should be ever-green, but… So, on the day that we are talking, tomorrow is the Met Gala. And the theme for the Met Gala is "camp."

BL: Oh!

EDP: And there's all these conversations now because people are focusing on camp in relationship to fashion but none of the histories have included Black people, or other people of color. The only person of color who was mentioned in the essay which this theme of camp is focused on is the Cuban singer La Lupe, she's the only one. And so Patrick Kelly was someone who did a lot of things at the intersections of Blackness and camp, right? And so it just to me reaffirms the importance of my doing this biography of him, and keeping the names of people of color in fashion and style history in my mouth because we have to speak their names. You know they have to get the credit that they deserve. We are their survival. We are the

continuance of their work. So, yeah. Thanks for that.

BL: Yeah, wow. Thank you so much for sharing that. I love that last bit about we are the survival of their work. That's beautifully said.

So in your text, "Yearning To Be What We Might Have Been," you discuss how queer men perform for heteronormative audiences and how they are "fierce accessories." What are some steps that other queer men or other queer folks can take to hold themselves accountable and/or challenge their own complacency in a heteronormative society?

EDP: Yeah. I think. I don't know. I don't want to make it overly simplistic, but I think for me the way I approach it is the same way I actually approach teaching. As a teacher, I have knowledge to impart. But I never think that I don't have anything to learn either. Right?

I am a forever student in the school of my ancestors, in the school of creating community with people with whom I share experiences and with those who I don't. And so I think the first thing and the most important thing that one can do is to realize that you don't know everything. (Laughs.) Right?

And to be open to the fact that you can be wrong and that you have something to learn. That's to me the really, really important part of what it means to hold oneself accountable, or be willing to be held accountable by other people. And I speak specifically in this moment to cis-gender men who are queer, because that's who I was speaking to in that article. It's okay to be wrong. It's okay to hold yourself accountable. It's okay for someone to listen when someone says: You know I felt unseen by this comment you made, or abused, or what have you.

I also think that—I guess I already said this, but—humility is huge. To have the humility—because that's really what it is, the difference between us being accountable and not, right, is ego.

BL: Right. Right.

EDP: And, you know, recognizing that when we get puffed up by someone sort of calling out some way in which we are being you know sort of relaxed in our privileges is just the ego is bruised in that moment. And so I think that a strategy I would give to people is to just kind of talk yourself down, to recognize that that's what it is. And ego is like a child, right?

Children are humans, right? And people forget that. People think that children are people that have to grow up to become human. No, they're human, right? So, you know you can say: Okay ego, I understand you're bruised right now. You're hurt, and this is why you know you want to actually puff up and not be held accountable in this moment, but, you know, that's not going to actually be useful right now. So, you

know, calm down, chill, open your ears, listen.

I think that people underestimate that. Like, you don't get anywhere without that. Right? If you're not willing to be humble you're not going to get anywhere with it. And then I think the other part of it is to be courageous enough to lean in. Right? To what you don't know. It's uncomfortable, right, growing. It's uncomfortable recognizing what we don't know. And I think academics have real struggles with this because we just always come from a place of, we should know. We have to have the answer.

BL: That's true.

EDP: And I just, to me, that's not a way that I live my life. I know what I don't know. And I don't allow the fact that I've earned a PhD and that I step into a classroom multiple days a week, or that I'm invited places to talk from a place of knowing to mean that that is something I can apply to every single area of my life at all times, right?

And lastly, I would say, just… be human. A lot of this comes from people's unwillingness to be held accountable I think, at times, comes from the fear of people catching us being human. Right? You know: Oh my gosh, you caught me being human. I made a mistake. Or, I don't know this thing. And that's just a lot to carry around. It's heavy. It's heavy, and, you know, like Badu says: you gotta pack light.

I would say to people, you know, accountability means, you know, packing light. The more you carry the less you're going to be able to sort of pick up this nugget of wisdom and insight that can make all the difference between you doing better and being better. Between being in community with someone and being adversarial with someone. Between being your truest self and being who you think you are. Right? And, so, that was my sort of thing.

And that was a hard article for me to write, too. Because I didn't want to offend anybody. And also I knew my own ego was on the line, right? To be a Black queer man who—you know, at the time when I wrote that I identified as cis. I now identify as a femme, so it's a little bit different, but still. My primary audience in my mind were Black men who identified as feminists who were doing the work, who are doing the work. And me trying to find and say: Where's somewhere we're not pushing? And one of the things that I recognized was that we were not pushing in thinking about trans identity, were not thinking about cis normativity, you know non-binary identity, what have you. And since that time, so much has changed, right? There's so many amazing works that have been published since then. C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides* Kai Green, you know, does amazing work at the intersections of Black and trans feminisms. You know, I mean, so that was a really humbling experience for me personally to sort of take a look at myself.

BL: On that note as well, getting into one of your other texts: "Black Girls Queer

(Re)Dress: Fashion as Literacy Performance in Pariah." You, well, I mention your argument, right, that you argue fashion functions as a literacy performance towards the pursuit of protection and desire.

So I feel like you definitely touched on this quite a bit throughout, but I wanted to ask this more simple question that I don't know if I asked you directly, but maybe can you describe your own connection to fashion. And then as well in getting to that, how do you describe Alike's complex relationship with fashion? I have my perspective in reading that text and how it felt, I don't know, just so affirming to read what you wrote in that text because I felt I related to it so much. Especially when you were talking about, well with Alike's, how she was performative with her fashion in front of her mother and how her mother was holding onto, her mother's connection with fashion as well and how she was still trying to kind of push for a specific identity for her daughter. So, yeah, with that if you wanted to talk a little bit about one, your connection to fashion, just because I feel like that's important to talk about, and then also Alike's complex relationship to fashion.

EDP: My, so, okay. My relationship to fashion, which I think is also why I wanted to write about Alike and *Pariah* and fashion, is, it comes from first and foremost growing up in a family of, like, no means, right, financially. And seeing my mom and her sisters and my uncles and my cousins and older sibling just be the most stylish and beautiful people that I've ever known with, like, no resources, right? And in hindsight I now realize that that was one of the things that they felt like they had control over in their lives, right? Was adornment, their dress. And it did something for them. They felt good, right? And took great care of their appearance and they just had the pleasure that comes from dress and personal style. And so how that connected to me as a Black queer kid growing up in a time that we didn't have the term "carefree Black boy," right? You know, we didn't have #BlackBoyJoy, you know, like any of those things.

Fashion was one of the ways that I was insisting upon my own selfhood, right? And what I got from my mom and her sisters and my uncles and cousins was, you know, that this could be an instrument. This could be something that I could use as a way to own myself, right? To belong to myself. And so for me it was about dressing in ways that made me feel comfortable, right? Even if it made other people uncomfortable. And that meant that I was like the weird Black kid who would wear jeans that were—you know I would buy jeans and then cut them all the way down the sides, right? Brand new jeans, which would drive my mother nuts, cut them down the sides, and then safety pin them back up. Right? Like, actual safety pins, and go to school.

Or, you know, I would go through these moments where I would only like to wear all black—I guess, even today I still have on all black. But, I, that was weird to people. It was like goth and strange. It was strange! You know, and so. But I realized that what I was doing was that was a way I could express myself. Sure, there was writing, and I wrote. And I wrote poetry and things like that. And there were other ways that I

expressed myself at that time, but fashion was the way that I could do it in public, right?

Like fashion was my way of making people, you know, have to come to terms with my difference, with my queerness. And insisting upon my place in the world. And being happy and joyful, and you know I think the difference between me and Alike in *Pariah* is that I didn't have a mom that tried to enforce her idea of who I should be, in terms of my gender identity and expression, through dress, right?

You know Alike had a mom who did that, so a lot of what Alike has to do in the film *Pariah* that I talk about, or chooses to do, is to, you know, try to navigate the sort of emergence of who she is as a person through dress. And sometimes dressing in ways that don't necessarily make her comfortable but that in that moment it ensured her safety, right? It ensured her survival. It might have spared her some pain, until that was no longer acceptable for her, right? To have to sort of due that in order to, you know, survive and just be. And then as we see in the film there are consequences to that, you know, for her. And I think what is also interesting is that people make the assumption that there's this kind of binary, right? You know, I'm queer outside, and I'm not queer at home. And as you see in the movie, even when Alike is around other queer people, right? Or people who aren't queer but they might have queer affinities, like the one young woman who has a crush on her in school, and says: "Oh, I wish that Alike would be a little harder." Even in these so-called queer spaces where we would think that everything is possible, right, and people could just be who they are, fashion still becomes this kind of constraining force. People still want her to dress to a particular role of who they believe she is in queer space, so that they can be who they think they are in queer space. So, the young woman is saying, "I want Alike to dress harder" because I see myself as femme, right? So if she could become this then this makes me feel that way. So I think that by the end of the film what we have is Alike in her writing but also through what I argue is her other literacy act which is her fashion, you know finally having these things on her own terms.

You know, we don't know where that goes. We don't know where that leads. As many coming of age films in general and queer films in particular, it just kind of ends, right? And everything is possible. But I always think of that as the kind of ultimate queer ending, right? Like at it's infinite possibilities. It's an exponential amount of, you know, so-called conclusions. So, yeah, I—always when I look at films—I'm watching two stories. I'm paying attention to the dialogue, and I'm watching the clothes. You know? I always think of clothes as the thing that tells, you know, that's telling another part of the narrative that's, you know, how I could kind of think about fashion in relationship to this film was reflecting on centrality in the sort of story of so many people, but especially of queer people and queer people of color. And then at the same time, you know, I knew it to also be true because it was a part of my experience as well.

BL: Right. Yeah I definitely think of, like, I really like that notion of the very queer ending, the endless possibilities because I think that, especially in thinking about time and in maybe even how Alike might, in the future, if this were to continue, her style might change. I think that especially in thinking about queer dress it's, I know for sure speaking of my own experience, it's changed a lot, a lot over time. And thinking about how it used to be a lot, thinking about how people imagined me to dress because of their ideas of me, but then has finally transitioned into how I see myself. So, thinking about that endless growth and thinking about that queer ending is definitely what came to mind when I was reading your text. I don't know, just super affirming reading that and the way you described it. It was such a great moment in class.

EDP: Thank you so much.

BL: So, the last questions that I have here are just more personal. If you want to talk about maybe what obstacles did you have to face to get where you are at now? And, also, the second question, what led you to do literacy work and how does that manifest in your classroom?

EDP: Okay, so in terms of obstacles. Yes. So some of them I've kind of spoken to, but I'll sort of reiterate it in the context of this specific question. So one of the challenges for me, is/was doing interdisciplinary work in composition and rhetoric, as I mentioned. Lots of people are really open to this, and I'm sure the experience that I had, I'm not alone in that. Just because I do Black queer theory. If you do disability studies, if you do anything on Latinx rhetoric and composition and literacy, African American literacy, feminist work, right? You know, you're managing both the disciplinary questions and interests and you're genuine excitement for being a literacy, composition, and rhetoric scholar—I chose this, right, for a reason. And then at the same time, you know, you're also accountable to the scholarly traditions and also contemporary work around those same fields that are happening outside of composition, rhetoric, and literacy as well.

And, you know, I think that that is an obstacle. It is a challenge. It means that you do more work, right?

BL: Yes.

EDP: It's true. I think you do more labor, like your bandwidth has to be stretched more. And I think people are kind of weird about saying that, or what have you. But I'm a New Yorker and I'm going to say it like I mean it. In my experience, it is more difficult. If you are doing it from a place of accountability to all of the different scholarly traditions and genealogies that make up who you are and what you do. You know, that's definitely a challenge and as I pointed out, I'm so grateful specifically for the Black queer feminist scholars and other feminists of color in the field who trailblazed and held that space for me, for you, for so many people to do the work that we are here to do, and also those outside of the field who did that. You

know, Kimberlé Crenshaw for intersectionality, you know, Audre Lorde, Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, I mean I can go on and on and on. June Jordan. Because they made everything possible.

I never am able to see things as an obstacle without also my attention being drawn to my being grateful for the fact that the universe did provide what I needed.

I think the other thing for me has been, and I'm again speaking only for myself. My experience of academia is that it can be at times a profoundly unkind place.

BL: Yes.

EDP: And I think that is very hard for me because I am a sensitive person. I'm also a very kind of like a—I try to be—a compassionate and empathetic person. So it's very hard for me to see people who, because they are hurt, or just because they are in a place where they're in their life where they're just mean, be unkind to other people. So I try my very best to be a source of kindness because I see so much unkindness in academic life, and just try to not show up in my academic life or in my personal life in ways that are unkind to other people.

Now, I'm not a shrinking violet or anything like that. Like I said, I'm a very direct person, I say what I think. But I always try to approach things from a place of love, and I always think of love as accountability. So even people with whom I have profound disagreements—what I know is that I am accountable to them in some way, shape, or form as a human being. And that I can say the truth and still be kind. Those things can both exist.

And so, that is often a challenge for me because I think so many people think of that as taking a pie in the sky mentality, a naïve mentality. I don't think that that's the case. I think that it is profoundly harder, if the culture is one where people are rewarded and celebrated for being cutting and unkind, to choose to be kind and still do one's work. So that's, you know, been two of my experiences.

In terms of how I bring that into the classroom, or in terms of literacy, is you know I just sort of try to approach teaching from a place of thinking of my students as whole human beings. Right?

I'm not always thinking of just the mind. If I want my students to take the blessings that I'm teaching in the classroom and apply that in some way in this world that is meaningful to them, and important to them, then I have to also recognize that I'm not dealing just with a person's mind, right? That a part of this work is also heart work. And that's another bad word in academic life. We're not supposed to talk about spirit, or spirituality, but I see myself as a, you know, spiritual activist in many respects. And I see my ancestors—I think Audre Lorde was talking about spirituality all the time when she talked about the erotic. Anzaldúa was certainly talking about spirituality and was a spiritual activist, right?

BL: Definitely.

EDP: And they, you know, always saw things in a very holistic, well-rounded, whole-human kind of way. So when I step into the classroom, I believe that we are creating the world we live all deserve to live in. I take being in a classroom very seriously. You know, whatever world we're going to live in, which is the world we all deserve, it starts right here. It's gonna happen right here. And I'm going to have to evolve and step up to who I need to be as a part of that if I'm going to ask my students to do the same, right?

You know, so I think that—I try to create room for that, you know, in the classroom. I try to make space for students to make mistakes and say the "wrong thing," and to know that I'm not going to give up on them, and to ask that they don't give up on me, or on each other. And that to me is a big part of literacy work and why I chose to be a literacy scholar.

Literacy to me brought me back to people. You know? It didn't emphasize the production, right, over the individual. It made me look at individuals that produced the writings that I was interested in, and the speeches, and the songs, and so on and so forth. And I, you know, I think that that is informing this pedagogy that I'm talking about, right? Of recognizing that when I'm in the room I'm in the room with people first.

So that's why I chose it. When I went to grad school I thought I was going to do African American literature and culture. And to some degree I still do—I could teach a class, you know, on African American literature and culture, and I incorporate it into my work. You can see it in fashioning lives. You know, I do a lot with Black poetry and poetics, Black literature, and 19th Century and 20th Century, you know but I chose and fell in love with doing literacy work because it was the thing that allowed me to get back to talking with people. And, you know, that was always a love of mine. That's why, you know I was a student journalist when I was in high school and in college because I loved interviewing people. So it's no surprise that that's part of my methodology now because it's the thing I've always loved to do.

BL: You're really getting me in my feels because that was just so powerful—hearing you describe your teaching and how important it is to you and then thinking about making the classroom into a space that is the world we all deserve to be in, the sort of collective, group effort situation, and it's so important to think about teaching in that way because I think that just based on location in terms of demographics that that for sure changes—even in thinking about west coast versus east coast, and then in my situation of a private school, right? The demographics that includes and what folks are in the classroom versus who isn't in the classroom—that's a great reminder that continuing to think of the classroom in that space. I think there's always going to be some pushback, at least in my experience I can imagine there's still going to be pushback because not everyone is going to view teaching in that

same way, right? But that really, really got me in my feels, just hearing you talk about that, so.

EDP: Yeah. And I think people who commit themselves to that too because there is going to be pushback. And I want to be clear, right—I teach about really hard stuff. As I'm sure you do. Everything I teach—it's talking about white supremacy, it's talking about ableism, it's talking about homophobia, transphobia, cis-normativity, you know, xenophobia. Everything I teach, it's going to touch on those things. And, you know, I guess to some degree students self-select in to those kinds of conversations for various reasons. Some because they care about those issues and they don't feel like they get to talk about it elsewhere, and some who maybe don't think that those things are actually legitimate and want to actually challenge that. And I'm fine with that if we're going to be respectful, right, and engage in a way that is also accountable to everybody who is in the room, you know?

I don't come into the classroom to change someone's mind, I come into the classroom to teach, to give you the information and you know I hold the best hope that whatever it is that you do with that information that you're going to do it, you're going to use it in a way that's going to be accountable to everyone because at the end of the day we've got one earth and we're going to have to share. So, you know, my hope is that in telling my students the truth and in creating knowledge together, and creating a space where people can make mistakes, right? Can share information, can learn, that it does actually make an environment where people leave the room being better to one another and being kinder and better to themselves, as well. And I want to highlight also because I think that what you're making me think about too in being accountable too is that teachers also have to take care of themselves.

BL: Yes.

EDP: We have to be well in order to do the work that we have to do, but we should be well just because we deserve to be well.

BL: Yes!

EDP: And feel happy and at peace. And so whatever self care we have to do and insist upon, right? We have the right to that as well. I think that that's something that people maybe feel more room to do when you're on tenure track or things like that, and maybe as graduate students people don't necessarily feel, you know, that they've earned the right to that. But no, you don't have to earn the right to serenity. Right? You don't have to earn the right to be able to take a full breath. You don't have to earn the right to have a moment of quiet or just something that acknowledges the fact that you're human. Right?

That's not something that graduate students have to earn. You're earning a degree. You're not earning the right to be human, and a whole person in the classroom. That

doesn't have to be earned.

BL: Yeah. And I feel like I already am getting to this last questions, which is what is some advice that you can give to queer graduate students of color and graduate students of color as well, and I feel like that's at least something that I'm going to take away from this is just in hearing that. Like, it's okay to take care of myself and take that deep breath.

It's kind of ridiculous that I need that reminder, but, for sure, it is important to hear and to tell myself, so hearing you talk about that. I was wondering if you wanted to add on to that or if you had some other advice as well that you wanted to leave us off with, especially for graduate students of color or queer graduate students of color.

EDP: Yeah. And I should say too, I also need people to remind me too. Right? In this moment I'm present because you're interviewing me. But trust and believe that I'm on the phone or in the group chat with my friends all the time where they have to remind me that, as Audre Lorde says, my self care is not indulgent, it's an act of political warfare.

BL: Yes.

EDP: So I just want to be clear in saying that. Just as you're saying my saying that is a takeaway for you, I offer it, and I'm glad it is a takeaway for you because someone also has to remind me. And that's a part of us being in community with one another. That's a part of, you know, our accountability to one another.

But advice. Wow. Okay. So, my major thing I always like to remind graduate students of is: Do not wait until you finish coursework, until you take your exams, until you finish your dissertation, until you get that first job, until you get tenure, until you become a full professor, an endowed professor, a chair—to develop courage.

The university, the college, the academy, the world, will always have one more thing to promise you if you just put courage to the side for now and just go along with the status quo to get along. A lot of people tell themselves stories that "when I get tenure I will do this… When I get my PhD I'm gonna say this… When I'm the chair I'm gonna say this…" And, you know, the truth is that you'll probably say none of those things, right? If you are not developing the courage muscle now.

Maya Angelou says that courage is the most important of the virtues because without courage we can't practice any other virtue consistently. We can't love, we can't forgive, we can't be generous, we can't be any of those things without courage. You can do them erratically, but not consistently. And so, you know, I have made it a practice since my—you know, it was in graduate school when I came to this decision, that what I stand for and what I believe in is not going to be compromised by what any university, college, administrator will promise me. If I can put my

integrity to the side now, and wait until I get the promotion, right? If you don't have it now, you won't have it later. I promise you. That's been my experience.

And I know that that's easier said than done, so I just also want to ask that people be compassionate with themselves. Don't judge yourself. If you're out there listening right now, I didn't say that to judge you! Or for you to judge yourself. I say that so you can be, as I have to be even now, self-reflexive. And remember what I'm about and what I say I'm about and be courageous in not waiting until some other time where I have some power—that I actually already possess—to do the right thing, by myself and by other people.

The other thing that I would say, kind of connected to this, is that there's a book that I love it's by Don Miguel Ruiz, it's called *The Four Agreements.* And it's a book that I think everybody should read, and I think that if you live your life by those four things or just one of those four things, I've found that life is just so much more better.

One of the things that he says is that you have to be impeccable with your word, right? What you say you're going to do you have to do it. And the first way of being impeccable with your word is with yourself, right? So if you say that I'm going to practice self care, you have to practice self care for yourself. You can't go out preaching the gospel and virtue of self care if you don't start with you.

BL: True.

EDP: And if you are, then you're not being impeccable with your word. If you say that you are antiracist and that you're a feminist and that you are for queer, trans, non-binary, LGB people, then you have to actually show up in ways that reflect that. Or you're not being impeccable with your word. So, I would say to graduate students, you know, who you say that you are and believe that you are, that you want to be that person. And if you make a mistake, it's okay, start over, right? But do your very best to be impeccable with your word. To show up with your whole self and be that person.

I also think that it's important to be fed with the integrity of your own choices. What I mean by that is… You know, I guess it goes back to what I said earlier about me choosing my project, right? I think that the universe always rewards us when we live our lives with integrity and in alignment with our purpose, right? I was supposed to do a project about Black queer literacy, right? And everything from what I could see in front of me said to me: This might not go well. But I did it anyway, right? And I think that ultimately I did it because that was the work that I am here to do.

Carmen Kynard talks about her advisor Suzanne Carothers saying: "Don't confuse the work for the job." Right? And, so I think I would say to people. Well, first, thanks for Carmen for sharing that and for Suzanne for sharing that with Carmen so that it

can feed us. If you don't confuse your work for the job then your work is what you are here to do and what you're going to do regardless. Right?

I was going to publish a book on Black queer literacy even if it meant copying and pasting the whole document and putting it on Wordpress. It was gonna be born. And that gave me a certain kind of freedom, right? To just to do the work. Because that's really what ultimately was my commitment. There wasn't a job that I would have taken if they said, "you can't do this." There's not an institution I would want to be tenured at, even, if they said: "we want you to be here, but you can't do that—we want you to do this kind of thing." You know?

And so, I just think it is so important, again, in graduate school, to begin developing that—I keep saying muscle, I was to think of another word—but to keep developing that tool, that instrument of just letting the integrity of you saying yes to what you really are about and what you're really here to do, and the way that that just feeds you. Just letting that be enough, you know. And trusting that. And surrounding yourself only with people who are going to support you. You know, we have enough people telling us not to believe in ourselves. And some of us are geniuses of negative self-talk, we don't need people around us to tell us what we can't do. We need people around us who are going to love and nurture us and tell us what is possible. And I want to say—I spoke to this earlier but I didn't speak her name—Deborah Brandt, who was my advisor and who is an incredible human being. And she taught her students, well I won't speak to all her students I'll speak for me. She is and has forever been at the top of her game, right? Whatever the game is of literacy studies. Hardly anybody writes anything about literacy and doesn't cite *Literacy in American Lives* or *Literacy as Involvement* or talks about sponsors of literacy, but she does not move in the world in a way that is egoic. She affirmed the dreams of her students and what they wanted to do. She told us the truth about how other people might perceive it, but she always supported us and nurtured us in what we wanted to do and encouraged us to pursue our purpose and to be in alignment with the integrity of our word and our work, right? And that that was the reward.

And also that good work takes time. And that would be the last thing that I would say to remind graduate students: Good work takes time. The rigor, the care, the love, the joy that you bring to what you do it will all pay off, you know. Take your time. My other advisor Nellie McKay used to say, "The race is not to the swift but to those who endure." Right? So, take your time, do it right, do it because you love it, and be fed by the integrity of your choices.

That's it.

BL: Wow. Snaps to that.

EDP: (Laughs)

BL: Thank you so much for just being so thoughtful with all of your answer—way

beyond what I would have even asked for, so thank you so much.

EDP: Thank you B. Thank you for having me be a part of this. It's, you know it's a gift and a joy to be able to have a conversation with you. And especially with graduate students period, right? It's the thing that is most exciting to me. The things I see junior faculty now do and I see graduate students do, the communities that you all are building, the ways in which ya'll are like you know challenging the field in ways that it needs to be challenged. And the kinds of questions that you all are opening up. You know the next gen listserv, DBLAC, right? The fact that there are a number of queer folks of color who are doing queer folks of color projects.

BL: Yes!

EDP: Things that just to me are so exciting, so exciting. And that's where I put my hope. You know, that's where I put my hope, and I am grateful and expectant for what I know is going to really come to full bloom. It already is, it already has, and so thank you for being a part of that, and inviting me to a conversation that affirms that for me. I'm very grateful.

BL: Thank you so much. I'm so excited. You'll be our first episode for the new season of *This Rhetorical Life*, so I'm so so excited to share this with everyone. I'm sure they're going to get the feels in the same way that I am in just hearing you talk about everything.

EDP: I'm a Cancerian, so I know all about the feels!

BL: (Laughs.) I guessed it! Oh my…

Cue music: "Bass and Drums" by OLC.

BK: *This Rhetorical Life* is edited and produced by B. López and Ben Kuebrich. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter and stay tuned for new episodes each month.