

Episode 99: Brandon M. Erby

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, Brandon M. Erby talks about Tougaloo College, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Mississippi, his research on Emmett Till, racial violence and African American survival practices, and navigating conversations about race in first-year writing.

Brandon M. Erby is an Assistant Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies and African American and Africana Studies at the University of Kentucky. He received his B.A. in English from Tougaloo College, M.A. in English from Seton Hall University, and Ph.D. in English & African American and Diaspora Studies from The Pennsylvania State University. His research areas include African American rhetoric, literacy and language studies, critical pedagogy, and rhetorical history. Erby's work appears in *CLA Journal*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal*, *Open Words: Access and English Studies*, and *Journal for the History of Rhetoric*. He is currently writing a book about the activism, pedagogy, and legacy of Mamie Till-Mobley.

Brandon, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You went to Tougaloo College, a private Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Jackson, Mississippi. What was it like to attend Tougaloo? And how did Tougaloo shape you as an educator?

BME: Absolutely. No, thank you for having me on the podcast. I've been a fan of this podcast since the beginning. It's always an honor to be here and to speak with you. Yes, I attended Tougaloo College in Mississippi. I'm originally from Saginaw, Michigan, a very small city near the thumb of Michigan. So it was really different when I got to Tougaloo. But one of the things that I knew I wanted to do for my college study was attend an HBCU. Because growing up, there seemed to be this divide for me in thinking about education and what that meant. Attending my K through 12 schools, I was often the only Black person in many of my classroom settings. So I knew that I wanted to see what else was out there.

For Tougaloo, what it did for me was it showed me that there was a way that you could center Blackness in an educational environment. When I'm thinking about Blackness, I'm not necessarily thinking just about skin color. But I'm thinking about the cultural practices, food practices, differences in class, differences in regions. I, from Michigan was a part of what was happening in Mississippi. I had many classmates from Chicago. And then of course, many classmates all across the state of Mississippi.

While we were mostly all Black in terms of phenotype, we were bringing a host of differences into the space. But also with the understanding that we were here to receive an education, and to hopefully go forward in particular careers that will bring prestige or bring some type of

community work back into our local neighborhoods and things of that nature. For Tougaloo, it was really just this understanding that this is where I belonged, in terms of a tradition of education, a tradition of scholarship.

You know, the interesting thing about Tougaloo is it sits on a former slave plantation. You travel there, you can see that, “Oh, yes, this is a plantation.” The mansion where the slave owner lived is still on campus. So that history is always with you as you're navigating the space. But there was something about how that space was then repurposed into a college that sat well with me. And I think really just speaks to my entire educational tradition or my, I guess, arc of pursuing education after I left Tougaloo.

SW: Brandon, you're talking about navigating spaces. I'm really interested in your transition from Tougaloo College in Mississippi to Seton Hall, a private Catholic university in New Jersey, and then to Penn State, a large research 1 university in Pennsylvania. What was it like to navigate between these different institutional spaces?

BME: Yeah, one thing that I will say is I majored in English at Tougaloo. And the English Department there has a very strong track record of placing their graduates into PhD programs. So one of the things that I knew going into that degree is that if I wanted to pursue graduate-level work, Tougaloo would be a great place for me to do that. There, I was a part of this program called the Mellon Mays Program, which really helped underrepresented students attain a PhD, then go on to become a professor with a tenure-track position. So that really helped me think through a career choice as a sophomore in college, which I think gave me an advantage at that time.

Then I would say one of the things that that program did for me as it introduced me to research; it introduced me to archives. In my junior year at Tougaloo, I was able to spend a summer at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. And in that program, every single week or so, we were able to learn from, or be mentored by, various scholars across the country. One of these scholars was a person by the name of Simone Alexander, who was a professor at Seton Hall. And I really got a good vibe with her. We were talking about her work, my work, and she asked me what was my graduate school plans. At that time, I really didn't know.

But she said, “If you would want to attend graduate school in the Northeast, I would love to have you as a student.” So that's really how I got to Seton Hall. But I also knew that the English Department at Tougaloo would help me pursue the PhD after I left Tougaloo. With Penn State, I was then a graduate student at Seton Hall. And there was a conference at Penn State on African American literature and poetry. I went to that conference, I presented, and I was introduced to faculty members and students at Penn State who also asked me about my research interests, things that I was invested in studying, and encouraged me to apply to Penn State.

So it just seems that I was always placed in a position where people were looking out for me; they thought that I could further my work at their particular institution or under their particular guidance. And I think things just worked out how they worked out in that way. But I was always invested in going somewhere where I felt that I could get mentored, and that was without the regional dynamics. From Michigan, I went down to Mississippi, went to New Jersey, and then went to P-A. These were just places that I felt that I could get the most out of my educational experience, being mentored by these specific professors.

SW: Let's talk about your teaching. You're teaching a class right now called Remembering Emmett Till. Can you talk about the course, what you're exploring, and what you hope students come to better understand?

BME: Absolutely. First, my dissertation was on Mamie Till-Mobley, who was Emmett Till's mother. And what I wanted to do with my dissertation is really show that this woman was a rhetorical agent. We often see her as someone who orchestrated her son's funeral with a open casket to really show the world what racial injustice could do. With that being one of the ways that we remember her, I started thinking through the different types of other modes of rhetoric and rhetorical expression that this woman did. Because I didn't think that her story stopped there. What my dissertation did was look at these different ways of rhetorical expression that Mamie Till-Mobley continue to do outside, or in addition to, her casket decision.

One of the things that resonated with me is that in 2016, 2015 or so, when I was starting to think about my dissertation work, we were right in the middle of the Black Lives Matter movement: Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, all of these individuals. We were seeing their tragedies, and we were seeing mobilizing efforts happening. And I started to connect Emmett Till in 1955 to what is happening in 2015, 2016 and 2020, 2021.

So what this course is doing is just trying to introduce students to ways of thinking through racialized events. And how we can not necessarily think of these events and these deaths and these individuals, as simply victims; but what is happening after the death, after the violence? I think with Emmett Till, after Emmett Till is murdered, Mamie Till-Mobley said, "Okay, now it's time to act." She said she had a job to do, and she wanted to use that death to inspire others into activism, into societal change.

This is how I'm thinking about my course, really thinking that the death of Emmett Till, the death of George Floyd, the death of Breonna Taylor...all of these deaths, they sit with us, they haunt us. But they encourage us also to continue to do the work of activism and social justice and change. I don't want students to think of Emmett Till as just a victim of violence. But I want them to understand that he was a human being, he had family, he had dreams. We must never forget that.

So it's really just this understanding of how we remember Emmett Till is not necessarily censoring the tragedy of his death and the injustice of his death. But what types of rhetorical work, what types of compositions, what type of creative projects are being performed and being

produced to keep his memory alive? So I think that for me, the idea of preservation and holding true to our memories of certain events and cultural events really help us with our justice work. And what this class will hopefully do for students is to understand that if we remember Emmett Till in specific ways, if we would commemorate him, if we always remember what happened to him, this is a form of justice work.

What we would do in this class is explore archival sites, because I'm very invested in showing students that there are certain narratives we hear. There are certain narratives that circulate, and sometimes they're untrue. For Emmett Till, there were many things said about him. There were many things that were created to justify what happened to him. I want us to go back to these newspapers, back to these interviews, so we have a true understanding of who Emmett Till was. And I think that also can help us understand how this narrative work happens in a contemporary sense. When we think about George Floyd, we think about Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, there are certain narratives circulating about them that try to justify what happens to them. So it's a constant learning, or unlearning, project that I hope students will see when trying to get the narrative and the record right.

I'm also thinking about these different digital sites. There's a great site called The Emmett Till Memory Project that really helps us see what happened to Emmett Till in Mississippi, and also place sites in Mississippi and across Chicago. I'm hoping that students will see that they can be present in these historical moments, and how the history is constantly informing our present. So it's really just this understanding that 1955 was several decades ago, but what happened still haunts us. It still inspires us. The memory is still there. And as long as we are remembering who Emmett Till was, and seeing the connections between the history and the present context, that we can also use this to inspire more justice work.

SW: Your recent article titled, "Surviving the Jim Crow South: 'The Talk' as an African American rhetorical form," explores racism and the history of racial violence against Black people. It also talks about African American survival practices and conversations Black parents have with their kids. I was hoping to give you some space to elaborate and talk more about this article, and what you hope teachers and readers can take away from this great work.

BME: This again, I started thinking about this project within my dissertation. Was Mamie Till-Mobley really thinking about who she was as a mother, and how she was trying to navigate different regional dynamics when she decided to let Emmett Till travel to Mississippi in 1955. With Emmett Till being from Chicago, then having to travel to the Jim Crow South, there are ways that Mamie Till-Mobley thought about how he should conduct himself and engage in social dynamics during his travels.

I started really to think about this, because Mamie Till-Mobley writes about how she had to give her son "The Talk" in 1955. This was important for me because I received "The Talk" several years ago. I really started to think about how this is not something that is an isolated conversation, but it's a part of a larger rhetorical form for Black Americans. So what I wanted to

do in this article is really highlight the idea of that. Rhetoric is not necessarily just an academic field, but it's a part of an everyday practice. And with this everyday practice, of course, there are intersections with issues of race, racism, violence, and death.

So with “The Talk,” I wanted to highlight that it's an important African American rhetorical form of discourse. But I also wanted to contextualize it and historicize it a bit more in the article. With me, it's starting with this premise that Black children are seen as older, they're seen as more threatening, they're seen as more likely to engage in criminal behavior than white children, for example. Several tenets are part of “The Talk” that take place; beginning with, I think, the rhetorical concept of *kairos*. Black parents, or parents of Black children, have to figure out when is the best way to have this conversation? Because they want to, of course, preserve their child's innocence and make sure that they are able to live in a world that is free, where they can pursue their dreams and imaginations.

But they also have to understand that that won't be the case when they leave their home and they go out in public. There will be perceptions of them that clash with how they are seen with their parents and with their families. So it's really a matter of timing of when this conversation takes place. After that, it's thinking through rhetorics of anti-Black racism and violence. It's this idea that we live in this world that will see you as this. Of course, they have to respond to that reality. But they also have to challenge it as well, is something that I write about in the article.

That even though we're living in these times where racism exists, there's a way that we can talk about in a way that challenges stereotypes, and these type of labels that are placed on Black people. At the heart of “The Talk” is really just providing lessons and instructions and strategies for really dealing with racialized experiences and encounters. What I wanted to do with the article is just provide some case studies of how this occurs, or how it occurred in the Jim Crow South. I discussed the experiences of Charles and Medgar Evers, who are known as two Mississippi civil rights activists. Then I also discussed the childhood of Emmett Till, and what Mamie Till-Mobley did before Emmett Till travels down to Mississippi. And really providing context for these talks, and what happened during these times in Mississippi.

But I wanted to emphasize that instead of thinking about “The Talk” as just a way of teaching Black children how to behave in the presence of authority figures like police officers, which I think is what “The Talk” normally gets in our contemporary moments. I wanted to show in this article that it's really a genre about storytelling, and how a history of violence and how the preservation of a collective or cultural memory can inspire activism. I also think that this can help us address traumas and acts of violence in the future. I wanted to show that “The Talk” is really a collection of memories. It's a cultural genre for African Americans to preserve histories of trauma, histories of tragedy, but repurpose them for future work.

So I think that, yes, “The Talk” is about survival. But really, it's rhetorical efficacy. It's really in its ability to navigate different situations of how Black families practice survival. It's not necessarily about “Do this, do that, don't do this, don't do that.” But it's really about how there is

a tradition, and how there is a legacy of Black people teaching and learning about the ways of a racist world, and just simply navigating or implementing ways to navigate this racist world. Yes, it's about survival, but it's also really about care and nurturance.

SW: Let's move back to the classroom. I'm interested in how you have conversations with students in first-year writing about survival, about care, and about ways to navigate a racist world. How do you navigate these conversations and center African American rhetoric and Black lived experiences in first-year writing?

BME: I think I want to go back to my time at Tougaloo for this question. I think one of the things that was driven into me when I was at Tougaloo was this idea that African American Studies, African American rhetoric, these are legitimate fields of academic study. It's not just about what Black people are doing, but we can theorize them. We can explore the tradition of Black scholarship. These are some of the things that I try to think about when I'm teaching. I want to use my training in African American rhetoric to enable students to see that their time as a college student is not necessarily about consuming information or consuming the content, but how they are going to use that to navigate their own experiences of knowledge production.

One of the things that was taught to me in my training in African American rhetoric was that the field is about action taking, knowledge making, and community sustaining. It's a community-sustaining field. I want students to constantly think about what can they do in their learning trajectory that helps them take action? We always think about problems. In first-year writing, we start with the exigent. We start with this idea that rhetoric enables us to do something. I think African American rhetoric as a field, as something that can be theorized, starts with that idea of what actions can be taken. So this is for students who are taking African American rhetoric classes, or just taking a first-year writing class: that their writing can inspire change. It can produce action. It can shift how we think about certain things.

And this idea of knowledge making, I'm always thinking about what types of things can you produce in a first-year writing course? It's not necessarily about what I bring to you, but it's about you learning to be a content creator. This is something that students do not always understand in the first-year writing course, because they come into a college course thinking that me as the professor has something to teach them. Although that is true, I also want them to understand that you can teach me, you can teach your peers, you can teach your broader society and community.

Then going with that last thing that I said about it's a community-sustaining field: what are you trying to do to invest in your communities, in your surroundings, in your local environment? So in whatever assignment that I'm teaching, for instance, I always ask students to think about their families, think about their neighborhoods, think about their hometowns, think about the problems that are there.

Because as I was speaking about my time at Tougaloo, for instance, these things shift our understandings of the world. They help us understand the world, even in their local dynamics. So

I think starting there really helps students understand the type of work that could be done in the college classroom. And for me, these are pillars of African American rhetoric.

What I will also say, too, is that if I had to define African American rhetoric as these ideas of strategic practices of language communication, things of that nature that African Americans use to respond to issues of oppression or injustice. I talked about these ideas of survival and resistance. But we can also branch that out to issues of community and wellness or joy, issues of citizenship and freedom. But ultimately what I'm thinking is: what can you do in the composition classroom that allows you to dream, or imagine different possibilities of thinking? Of creating? Of living?

And as a first-year writer, you may not be thinking about the class in those ways. But I think it's helpful to get students to just think about how they can cultivate and create their classroom experience. And this is what I think African American rhetoric is doing: is trying to say that despite these issues, these injustices, these oppressions, we can reimagine a different world; a way of possibility. That's how I want to think of myself as a teacher. Of course, with African American rhetoric, I'm teaching the text, I'm teaching the genre tradition. But I think most importantly, it's really about the framework. You can think about your identity. You can about the language that you use. You can think about your cultural practices. You can think about ways that you can better communicate in the community that you are part of. And that there are ways that you can change things that you deem necessary. That can happen in the classroom.

So African American rhetoric helps us understand that our personal experiences, they're important, they can speak back against dominant narratives and cultural understandings of what is right, what is correct, what is professional, what is important. Or what belongs in certain spaces or places. I love assigning literacy narratives; supports the students' journey of learning. Students are able to explore the material, they're able to reflect on their learning experiences. But then they're also able to compose in a way that demonstrates a command of the content from their perspective. And in this digital world that we're in, I'm constantly thinking through available technologies of persuasion. I teach podcasts, I teach websites, I teach videos. Just like we see people using their cell phones to bear witness to racial injustices or to document certain things, I think that type of work can happen in the classroom. Well, maybe the material isn't as heavy as racial violence, but being open to seeing how technology is helping students become knowledge producers and content creators. I think all of that stems from my training in African American rhetoric.

SW: Thanks, Brandon. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.