

Episode 162: Donnie Johnson Sackey

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Donnie Johnson Sackey talks about environmental rhetorics and travel writing, human participation within natural ecosystems, Black Technical and Professional Communication, and teaching information design.

Donnie Johnson Sackey is an assistant professor of rhetoric and writing at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches courses in environmental communication, information design, user experience design, and nonprofit writing. He serves on the steering committee of the Polymathic Scholars Honors Program and the Bridging the Disciplined Smart Cities Faculty Panel. His research centers on the dynamics of environmental public policy, deliberation, environmental justice, and environmental cultural history. He's currently a non-resident fellow with the Center of Global Energy Policy's Carbon Tech Development Initiative at Columbia University.

Donnie, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your research and teaching are connected to environmental rhetorics and communication. Your thesis was on environmental writing and sustainability, and your dissertation was on environmental rhetorics, actor-network theory and cultural rhetorics. You teach courses on nature travel, environmental writing, environmental justice. Can you talk more about your nature and travel writing course, what your aims and goals are as a teacher, and what you hope students take with them from classroom conversations?

DJS: My teaching has always been an opportunity for me to measure or at least merge, I should say, two particular interests that I've had. And one interest is a focus on environment, and the other is a focus on design. And the idea that I have sort of been running with for quite some time is that I've always been interested in the creation of technical interventions that can facilitate better relationships between people, their communities, and their environment. And I've understood writing as one of those opportunities to facilitate better relationships between people in their environments. But I've also sort of a augmented writing, in a sense, to understand writing specifically as design work. And so this is kind of something that you may have noticed traced through my master's thesis, but also through my dissertation, where along the way, even if I don't have the word design in mind, the word design becomes more prominent in the work that I'm doing.

I think what's really interesting is that what allowed me to... I know we're going to talk about later, but what allowed me to sort of hone this focus on design as it relates to research were really a lot of the experiences that I had in the classroom through teaching. So teaching oftentimes became an opportunity for me to think about the ways in which writing is designed and the ways in which we can use writing, not necessarily to change people's relationships to space solely, but also redesign space, particularly in ways that it's more inclusive.

So the course that you're asking about that I have the opportunity to teach this semester here at UT was a class that originally I taught at Michigan State University as part of the professional writing program. It was an interesting course that was a writing requirement for students in the Fisheries and Wildlife program, but also students who were in the Department of Writing Rhetoric and American culture who were professional writing students took it as well.

And the class was really weird and interesting in the sense that it had been taught previous years every two years, and the idea was to either focus on nature or travel or environmental writing, but most of the folks who had taught it didn't really have a sense of how to make all three of those things make sense together, right? Because they're very odd and strange. And so I saw the class as an opportunity and a challenge to really think about the ways in which we can make all three of those things meaningful together. And at the time, I was taking classes in the geography department as part of my special design concentration, and I was engaging with readings that were sort of looking at critical ecotourism, ecocriticism of ideas about nature. And I really started honing in on this one area known as Psychogeography, which really is about thinking about the body as a data collection device to sort of think about how we can use our senses in order to make sense of space, and also the ways in which we can leverage those senses to perhaps put together designs that help people understand space and environment largely in new and interesting ways.

So the class, as I re-designed it, and I've packaged it and I've brought it here to UT, really sort of looks at nature travel and environmental writing specifically through diverse cultural contexts. And it explores different ways of documenting place-based experiences. And what I ask the students to think about is I ask them to consider, "How can travel or even the idea of taking a different route across town, evoke different ways of thinking about themselves or perhaps even experiencing the world?" Additionally, I asked them to think about how cultural narratives or even customs that are embedded within place can be made more meaningful when we sort of use writing as a tool of interrogation. But most importantly, I asked them to think specifically about how we can best use writing to facilitate the sort of spatial experiences of others.

And the goals of the class ultimately are threefold, right? Through those questions, I want them to sort of generate story. I want them to use story in a way that is generative for other folks. I want to put them in a position where they're conducting research about space and the relationship to space or the relationship between other people in space. And I want to give them an opportunity to tell stories specifically through multimedia. And so some of the projects that we've had in the class are sort of reflective essays where they think about themselves in relation to space. That's usually kind of like an assignment that I oftentimes start the course off with, because how do you begin to investigate other people's relationship to space without thinking about what your own relationship to space is? Moving on, I've had other sort of assignments where, like this semester, we're doing a lot of food writing and thinking about the relationship between identity, food and place.

We're also doing some critical sort of readings on tourism. So we're reading [inaudible 00:08:14], Lovely Hula Hands, we're reading chapters from Phaedra Pazullo's Toxic Tourism. We're reading a lot of stuff that kind of folds environment and nature and tourism and into the

same space so that we can be critical of it. And then one final assignment that I've done, it's like a group-based assignment that really focused on design in the past, was have students construct psychogeographic maps. And these Psychogeographic maps usually are designed to be fun, where you're sort of playing around with the idea of thinking about space in a different way. And the original psychogeographers, that's what they did. They would take LSD and do Coke and literally wander around spaces and try to document their experiences. But in this class, last semester in particular, I asked the students to think about a way in which they can document a space or document spaces in class on campus in different ways that would help folks experience space in new ways.

I have to talk specifically about a student project, because I thought it was absolutely wonderful. They were really interested in thinking about how they can map bathrooms on campus in relation to the senses, like smell, sight, things of that nature. And they did a really interesting thing where they sort of figured, well, we can't all map the same bathrooms together, so we need to triangulate our bodies together. So they use a bathroom on our first floor, and they try to use that to kind of create a metric that made sense across all five of them. And then they went around campus and literally put together a metric that allowed them to assess the state of bathrooms. And I think they called themselves Shit Squad. It was so cool. And they put together something called the Crap Map. So of course we have this thing that seems just very playful, but when they were able to talk about this project, they actually spoke about how a project like this is important from the standpoint of accessibility.

Because if you're a person who suffers from Crohn's or any type of bowel issue or disability, you're always looking for a clean bathroom to use. Well, a map like this becomes really, really useful to sort of get a sense of what maps or what bathrooms on campus looks like. Additionally, a map like this perhaps has the opportunity to change the way that bathrooms on campus look, right? Because it creates the conditions under which administrators might be forced to provide certain bathrooms more attention than others.

And one of the things that I love about this group is that they put their project on Reddit, and I think within the span of four hours, they had something like 5,000 hits. So it was actually useful. So that's a little bit of how the classes function. I think this semester we're actually designing games, and I have to give a shout-out specifically to Timothy Oleksiak and Allegra Smith. I haven't delved into game design before, but that's what the final project is focused on. And those two have been absolutely wonderful in providing you with resources for design.

*SW: Your book, *Trespassing Natures: Species Migration and the Right to Space*, will be published in August 2024. I'd love to hear more about the ways this book is complicating our understanding of space, identity, and human participation within natural ecosystems.*

DJS: So I have to say that I've been working on this book since I was maybe 17 years old, if you can believe this. I have been interested in the idea of invasive species since I was in high school, and I was doing Envirothon, and it's just always been something that has sat in the back of my head. So when I started doing my doctoral work, I had an opportunity to take an independent study with the late John Monberg. And what we were really interested in with respect to this independent study was this idea of thinking about STS, or science and technology studies,

approaches toward understanding environment and environmental policy. What are the ways in which STS can help us understand particular deliberative mechanisms for solving science-based problems? And naturally, the work that we did in that independent study led to my dissertation, where I was really focused on this idea of how are invasive species made.

And I was looking at Asian carp, because Asian carp, obviously within Michigan and the Great Lakes is an emerging issue at the time. And there are all sorts of complicated ways in which we understand what makes for an invasive identity and how that invasive identity is leveraged to make policy arguments. When it was time for me to sort of think about how I can move on from that project, I was really interested in, again, sticking with the idea of invasiveness, but I wasn't so much interested in thinking about how species are made invasive from an identity standpoint. I was more interested in the idea of troubling invasion and the ways in which troubling invasion perhaps provides an opportunity for us to think about what does it mean to belong and be in community, not necessarily with other species, but also with other human beings.

And so what I end up doing in book is I end up thinking specifically about the idea of climate collapse, and what's happening with respect to climate collapse is the fact that species now are living in spaces that they previously have never lived before, and they will continue doing that. And if we understand that that sort of trend is happening and we also understand that there is no stop or arresting of climate collapse, at least for the foreseeable future, what does it even mean to be an invasive species in this current context? If the world is melting and everybody's on the move, I think what that tells us is that there's not necessarily just a crisis in identity, but there's also a crisis in the availability of space. And there is a crisis in terms of our institution's ability to actually sort of not just address these problems, but also cope with them. And so I spend the majority of the book sort of looking at particular species as being indicators of a set of problems that put us in a position where we should actually rethink what it means to belong.

I use species, I use non-human species, as an opportunity to actually sort of talk about the ways in which we need to think about humans as well, right? Because when we look at the Oceania or the South Pacific or where I'm from and where a lot of my family lives, which is the West Indies of the Caribbean, we're dealing with the situation where folks are dealing with stronger storms, rising sea levels, and we're looking at the very possibility of people whose homes will no longer exist. So if your home no longer exists and you're on the move, you have to find a new home. And what's really interesting is we have terms, much like invasive species, that designate what it means to move or flee an area as a result of climate change, right? Environmental migrant, climate displaced migrant, climate displaced person, environmental refugee.

But what's really sad about these sort of terms or titles that we impose among people is that the current refugee charter does not actually recognize climate change as a legitimate reason for claiming refugee status. And so ideally, I think what I end up doing towards the end of the book is I end up making this larger argument that when we think about belonging in space, we can't necessarily just think about non-humans. We also have to think about people as well. And part of thinking about people as part of this constitution means that we really need to think about what it means to dwell in a multi-species community, and we need to sort of address our institutions and modify our institutions so that they do take these things into account.

SW: Donnie, some of your more recent work focuses on technical communication. I'm thinking about your co-edited collection on Black Technical and Professional Communication in Technical Communication Quarterly. In the introduction, you all define Black Technical Communication as an "important and integral part of the discipline of TPC and foundational to understanding how TPC is taken up, applied, theorized and shaped in culturally sustaining and contextual ways." You all mentioned how TPC can be "slow to center race and ethnicity in continuous and consistent ways." Do you mind talking more about the exigence for this special issue and the ways in which you were, and still are, challenging TPC to address race and "attend to black experiences, contributions and scholarship?"

DJS: Yea, so one of the things that I'll say is that the work that we did in that special issue really emerges from the work that all of us did as part of the Black Technical and Professional Writing Task Force that was convened by then CCCCs Chair Vershawn Ashanti Young. And what Vershawn really wanted us to do was to essentially create a position statement specifically that focused on what Black Technical and Professional Communication was. So as much as I want people to read the special issue, I also want them to go to that particular document that's available, because I think that there is a lot more to glean from that. I think the exigence behind doing that particular work really came down to some of the stuff that you said, about wanting to center Black experiences more within TPC research and teaching. But I also think the exigence that emerged from us doing that work really sort of came from the fact that we wanted to have a place and create certain types of work that we could then use ourselves and benefit from ourselves.

The idea is that if this research isn't out there, that you would sort of create it or at least create the space for it so that you can continue to do this work. And so really, we were interested in defining what Black Technical and Professional Communication and Practices were, providing an opportunity for folks to see who were researchers in the area, as well as who were practitioners in the area. I think that this was also an opportunity for us to sort of advocate specifically for the inclusion of certain people who would not be considered technical communicators as actually being central to disciplinary literature of technical communication. I'm thinking about folks who do Black hair care, that is technical communication. But also, I think, again, at the end of the day, we were really interested in creating a space for other Black scholars like ourselves, particularly younger Black scholars, who are interested in doing incredibly rich methodological, theoretical, as well as practical work that centers the experiences of Black people.

SW: Donnie, there's clearly a call to action for the field of Technical and Professional Communication through this special issue. I'm interested in hearing how you feel like TPC has done in taking up this call and attending to Black Technical and Professional Communication.

DJS: Absolutely. I think that one of the things that's been really heartening about being able to do this work specifically, and I want to give them a shout-out, because I think it's important, Temptaous, Cecilia, Natasha, Constance, Ja'La, and Kimberly, is the fact that I think they themselves in their own right have also been continuing the work that we put in. But I also had the opportunity to look at article drafts, to see chapter drafts, to see presentations at conferences, in which people are not necessarily just citing the work and citing this particular call, but they're

actually sort of thinking about it as being an opportunity to do interesting generative work that is actually going to expand the field of TPC. And so in a way, it's been really sort of heartening to at least see that work happen, and not necessarily just within the realm of research, particularly within the realm of teaching. I've been kind of heartened to look at syllabi that actually center more the experiences or the work of Black TPC practitioners and scholars. And I only believe that that's going to happen more and more moving forward in the future.

SW: This is my last question. I'm trying to connect to the various threads in our conversation. In the last chapter of your dissertation, you talk about encouraging students to see the importance of designing spaces and experiences. We've talked about human participation in and with nature, which you explore more in your forthcoming book. Of course, I feel like we can take this same idea to design, more specifically inclusive design, to professional spaces, to our journals and fields. That seems to be at least some of your purposes for the special issue on Black Technical and Professional Communication. Let's go back to the classroom, though. You teach a class on information design at the University of Texas at Austin. How do you help students navigate the nuances of design and our choices and decisions around designing text images and information? How do you encourage students to see, think, analyze, and understand how power is embedded in design?

DJS: Absolutely. I'll talk exclusively about the information design class, but one of the things that I do spend a lot of time helping students to see is that no design is neutral, and that regardless of what the particular artifact is, there's always some type of politics that is embedded in its design, or it has some type of political effect when it is dropped into a system. And so we read things like from Langdon Winner, from his chapter, from his book, *The Whale and the Reactor*. We read *Do Artifacts have Politics?*, and I think that that is a really good opportunity for them to sort of think about how things like everyday infrastructure, which we don't necessarily think of as being inherently political or actually designed with a political intent, particularly a discriminatory political intent, and that these structures, these artifacts still exist long after the people who created them have died.

And so using those types of examples, an example like that, I put them in a position to sort of think about the ways in which design is not easy. Design is very hard, but also there's a lot of power that comes with being a designer. The ways in which you can sort of create experiences for people, the ways in which you can exclude people from experiences or from spaces. And so what I tend to do is I tend to give students examples like that, but I also tend to give them examples where they can kind of see the ways in which writing as design can sort of have particular discriminatory impacts or effects. And so we look at things like the design of U.S. Currency and the fact that the United States government, starting with the second Bush administration all the way through the Trump administration, fought, through the Treasury Department, fought a group of blind individuals who sued the government in order to make our money more accessible.

And now, we're finally going to have a tactile feature. But I explained to the students in the absence of a tactile feature on our money, blind people oftentimes have to rely upon weird folding systems and the kindness of strangers to not rob them in order to use our money. Or I even talk to them specifically about the amount of design that goes into our voting systems. And

I'm not speaking specifically about how we vote. I'm talking about the actual tech systems or paper-based systems that we use. And I use obviously the infamous 2000 Florida ballot initiative, or debacle, I should say, where tons of voters were disenfranchised because of bad technology design. But then I also help them to understand that bad designs with voting still happens to this day, where you look at Ohio, and things like layout is responsible for 10,000 people in a couple of counties having their votes not counted.

Or even in New York City, where something as simple as typeface, not typeface, but point size actually results in people not even being able to read what it is that they're voting on, because the text is less than 7.5 points. And so oftentimes I tell them, these innocent sort of decisions or these innocent decisions in design with writing actually has huge impact. When we think about the fact that our elections . . . and the election in Florida came down to just 400 votes, we now have elections that just come down to, in terms of the last election, three states and a couple thousand votes. So in a way, thinking seriously about design and writing, and the design of information through writing, becomes really important when you think about the fact that you could potentially disenfranchise people and lessen the impact of their community in terms of having any type of political power. In many ways, I think that that course becomes an opportunity to really sort of help students think about how much power they have through design and writing.

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