

Episode 71: Khirsten L. Scott

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Khirsten L. Scott talks about Black feminist epistemologies and pedagogies, hip hop and African American rhetorical traditions, multimodality, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Daughter of the US South, Dr. Khirsten L. Scott is a community-driven educator who centers and embodies liberatory Black feminist and womanist practice. She works across the disciplines of rhetorical theory and writing studies, digital and Black studies, as well as critical pedagogy. Khirsten is currently working on her first book which explores HBCUs and their survival within US Higher Education. Within the city of Pittsburgh, she is lead organizer and facilitator of HYPE Media (Homewood Youth-Powered and Engaged Media), a critical literacies program focused on youth-led story-making possibilities that respond to stigmatized narratives of Black girls, Black women, and Black communities. Khirsten is cofounder of DBLAC, Digital Black Lit and Composition, a virtual and in-person community offering writing support for Black scholars. She teaches at the University of Pittsburgh where she was awarded the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences Award for Excellence in Graduate Mentoring (2020). Her work can be found in *Kairos*, *Prose Studies*, the *Routledge Reader of African American Rhetoric*, *Mobility in Work in Composition*, *Bridging the Gap: Multimodality in Theory and Practice* and *Kentucky Teacher Education Journal*.

Khirsten, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at the University of Pittsburgh. I'm interested in hearing more about your pedagogies or your pedagogical practices and what you draw from or draw on and kinda your overarching aim or goal when it comes to teaching writing?

KLS: I'll start with the latter half of that question to really emphasize that in my first-year writing classes, I am trying to embrace an understanding of the undergraduate as already a researcher. First and foremost, understanding that they are doing research often and poking around and thinking through things and curious about information, whether that's about where to take a vacation and curating a whole weekend of events or reviewing Yelp reviews or just simply looking through their social media to decide who to follow or what rhetorical decisions to make when commenting, that research and analytic thinking are happening more often than we sometimes give credit for. And then to really take that possibility and move it in particular directions that challenge positionality, that challenge worldview and ideology, that challenge just really exposure sometimes. That students aren't always aware of what they know or what's even possible with what they do know.

So that feels like a very central kind of aim no matter who I'm teaching, in what ways. And so, in a more informed way, the first time I taught on the collegiate level within a Master's program... kind of wild to even think about that progression from graduate student instructor to tenure stream faculty and across, I guess now wow, 11 years. I don't know, this is the first time I've said this out loud. That first go round, I remember the pedagogy class I took at the University of Alabama and we read this book about composition pedagogies and it was kind of survey style book, five or six pages on different pedagogies and I remember the feminist pedagogy, I remember the community-based pedagogy. I really feel like those two capture the work that are most important to me.

I would even qualify it a bit further to think about Black feminist pedagogies and the way that Black feminist thought and epistemologies really move the work that I do in the classroom. And so I really struggle now. I understand the importance there when I was a Master's student and really trying to build my pedagogical lens and energy to go and to show up for the first time in those early times. But I really do feel a little constrained thinking about my pedagogy as a contained thing. That's because I feel so inspired by so many things often. I think back to my earliest memories of playing school with my brothers in the summertime and how my grandmother was our imagined lunch lady and how that informs my pedagogy, this idea of care and gathering and just imagination.

Then I think about the legacies of teachers that I've had and how their different pedagogical styles have informed my own and some who I just completely reject that I never want to replicate. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the way that those pedagogical memories inform my own practice and practices. But in a very tangible way, I think that, as I said, this Black feminist lens of thinking about community, thinking about the idea of self definition. For myself, thinking about how I show up in the classroom or learning spaces and what's required of me the kind of memories and traumas that I hold and that I bring into the space, my embodied realities, they all create a very, I would say, expansive pedagogy that I cannot disavow. I think it really moves me and allows to connect with students.

For the last five or six years. I've taught exclusively a hip-hop writing course for first-year writing. And so that has led me to really focus on hip-hop and thinking through the ways that we kind of incorporate the elements of hip-hop into teaching. So in that way, when you kind of merge this idea of community Black feminist thought and hip-hop, I feel so alive then when it comes to teaching first-year writing. I started down that path simply as a means of survival. I felt in graduate school, a little isolated, both in lived experience, but also intellectually. I felt that if I had to teach, it was going to be imperative that I started teaching something that mattered to me and writing was always important, but I needed something thematic, just conceptual to hold onto a bit more.

And so I turned to the music that I was listening to to make it through my own studies. It really opened up this space of hip-hop education and hip-hop pedagogies that allowed me to take culture as a topic. It really challenged students to think about the ways that they're passively

engaging culture and actively engaging culture and what that allows and disallows for writing. Within that became this kind of realization of some even earlier experiences with blues and jazz, jazz specifically in my upbringing in Memphis and how much jazz was informing my work. This idea of improvisation, the importance of pauses and silence with rifts and knowing that it's okay to depart and kind of get lost when you're teaching, that something will come of it. So I really, really appreciated the ways that hip-hop and hip-hop education and pedagogies have sustained me as a pedagogue, but even further inspired my students.

SW: Can you talk more about centering hip-hop, or I know you also center African American rhetorical traditions in your writing classes, what does that look like? What kinds of texts do you use or what kinds of assignments?

KLS: The idea of rhetoric for me is central to both my first-year writing instruction and then also just instruction writ large, whether I'm teaching in community settings or upper-level course offerings. That the idea of intentional messaging becomes really important for me to not only move through the material that I'm working with, but also to help students see the potential for their own analyses and connection points that there are messages happening, that there are possibilities within those messages and impossibilities and how we really sit and grapple with those moments. And so, as it relates to hip-hop, I'm very much interested in thinking with students around the idea of things like coded language. What are we actually talking about when we talk about hip-hop? How often is hip-hop being substituted for rap? Or how often is hip-hop being substituted for Black? Or urban? What these words really mean, the weight that they carry, and how loose and careless even some folks are in their usage.

And then how often some folks are malicious and intentional with their usage in a non-celebratory or derogatory way. So from the beginning, I'm already thinking about rhetoric as a way to engage Blackness and to really interrogate what's at the center of what we talk about and what we don't talk about, what we're willing to explore or what we're willing to foreclose as possible for not only the first year writing classroom, but also just culture and life in general. My movement to the University of Pittsburgh was for the development of African American rhetoric. And one of my first kind of moments of observation was what was really lost if we only limited to a US a view of rhetoric as it relates to Blackness. So there was an early pivot to kind of more largely describe this work as thinking about Black rhetorical traditions across the diaspora. And also just in these very situated ways of understanding the vastness and the fluidness of rhetorical possibilities for Black life and culture.

What's unique about that placement at the University of Pittsburgh is that it exists within the public and professional writing major. So I'm able to then think through what it means to understand Blackness and Black messages and Black intentionality in public discourse, which is really important to me.

So for texts, that could range from thinking about for instance, the *Routledge Reader on African American Rhetoric*, which gives us a nice survey, anthology style representation of texts. There's

also an online companion to that reader that allows a little bit of possibility across modalities and range. There's also *On African American Rhetoric*, I believe an edited volume with Keith Gilyard and Adam Banks.

But there's also just a huge collection of material I'd say, across communication studies, across rhetorical studies and Black studies, Africana studies, even education. That's exactly how I approach my teaching of Black rhetoric, to think of it as multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, moving across disciplines and also moving across communities. So I'm not limited to the spatial reality of the kind of intellectual academic sphere, but instead looking to communities and actually saying, "What do people have to say about this? How do we look at their narratives? How do we use social media as a resource to see how people are circulating information?" Podcasts, music very much connected to my hip-hop work, thinking through the ways that music has told stories. I think one clear example, and of course that I've really loved working on, it's pretty new, but I really, really appreciate it. It's called "Storying Black" and the class is really about the concept of storying as a both intellectual literary even and I would say literacy driven epistemology that allows you to story something, to narrativize it.

What really comes to mind is the work that Kevin Young is doing around the idea of storying and that's really where that inspiration is drawn. But if you take the title of the course, I think this gives some insight into how I'm thinking about how it ticks and how I'm thinking about assignments. I might take that first portion of the title and say, "Storying Black Pittsburgh." So now we're talking about spatial realities of storying new Blackness. Or we might say, "Storying Black history." So in that section or units of the course, we're talking about museums or we're talking about Black history campaigns. We might watch ads or look at still images from billboards and then students are able to choose. They might say "Storying Black *wherever they're from*," or "Storying Black *whatever their major is*."

That really allows these vast possibilities for exploring the idea of storying and Blackness through these rhetorical interventions. And once, when I was teaching the hip-hop course and even when I got into doing Black rhetoric at an institution like the University of Pittsburgh, where there are very few Black students within the larger kind of makeup of the university, I was very hesitant. I asked myself, "What does it mean to teach concepts around Blackness and Black rhetoric in spaces where this is not the majority population?" And some of this was a direct response to my own experience of graduating from an HBCU, of being raised in the deep US South and thinking about what it meant to have seen Black people often and to been in community and engagement with them very often and in very meaningful ways.

I had to kind of back off of that feeling some. It still cycles in my head very often and very loudly, but there was so much to be gained in the moments of sitting with students to think through what they knew and what they did not know. What they were willing to explore and what they were not willing to explore. And that's where the Black feminist piece comes in because I start every semester with...the University of Michigan has this heuristic called a social identity wheel. It asks you to think about your identity constructions and where you are in

proximity for engagement. Meaning what do you think about the most? What do you think about the least?

I use this as kind of this gauge, so to speak for the semester. At the beginning of the semester, the midterm point, three-quarters of a way and then the final. And no matter where you are, I'm asking you to think about who you are and how you're showing up with these texts. What are you willing to explore and unwilling to explore? It's really this act of critical vulnerability that asks you to lean in, instead of leaning back into the work that's required to really think about culture in a meaningful way. Whether you identify or not with the realities that are being described.

SW: Your teaching and research also intersects cultural rhetorics and multimodality. How does cultural rhetorics inform a multimodal approach to teaching writing, and vice versa?

KLS: I really owe some of my academic introduction to multimodality to Danielle DeVoss, who was a Watson Visiting Professor at the University of Louisville when I was finishing up my doctoral studies. She introduced us to one to Cindy Selfe's oft cited piece on aurality. And when we started to talk about aurality, I remember there was this one section about, and I think it was towards the end in the conclusion where Cindy Selfe makes the argument that it should never be understood that there is one tool or one way. I'm very careful to say that Danielle introduced me to my intellectual understanding of multimodality because in that moment, I started to think back to all of the ways in which my entire life was shaped around the idea that there's not one tool or one way to do anything.

This is me thinking about my grandmother upcycling every jar or container or learning a rap to learn multiplication facts or just, just countless examples that I can think through that allowed me to say that there is no one way or one set of tools or devices that I will use to convey a message.

And to me, that is the practice of a culture and then further of a culture's rhetoric or a cultural rhetoric. So in that way, I'm always thinking about myself as a meaning maker. I think that as a pedagogue, I have the potential to impart meaning, but also to find meaning in all that I'm doing. So that's an affirmation that I share with myself all the time that I am a meaning maker and I am full of meaning. I feel all of the work that I'm doing is attempting to locate meaning so that it can be shared with other folks, so that meaning could then be produced and reproduced in these multiple ways. And so modalities for me become just additional ways to engage. That I think about educators, like my partner. My partner taught on a primary level. I remember he would always talk about differentiated learning.

Those are not terms that we necessarily are bringing in, but when he breaks it down, I'm just like, oh, that makes complete sense to me that you need to tailor material to particular learners so that they can have the most advantageous outcomes. And I think about one of my good friends, Sara Alvarez, who always said, "We can learn so much from education." In fact, we're often two steps behind them. I was just like, if you take this idea of differentiated learning or what it means, you take differentiated learning as a rhetoric that you're thinking about what intentional steps do I

need to impart or to explore or to embody in order to convey or reveal a particular message to someone, it just started to click for me.

That I could actually construct these units or pieces of material for students that would allow them to see so many more possibilities than just saying, “Here's an article or here's a book and read it.” But I want to be clear here because I do think that sometimes in multimodality, there's this kind of disavowal of the alphabetic text for some and I do still find value in the alphabetic texts for many. And it makes me think of one of my favorite quotes from Toni Morrison. And she says, “I only have 26 letters of the alphabet. I don't have color or music. I must use my craft to make the reader see the color and hear the sounds.” That quote is so important because I want my words to move. I want them to feel poetic, but I thought about what happens if I combine all these things about what Toni Morrison is saying. What if I have the words and the color and the sound and I'm still able to make those words move? That is even more impact.

So whether or not the student then turns to the color and I'm kind of symbolizing that as visual art maybe or the music, whether they're producing things orally. I think what becomes most important to me is that they have at their disposal so many moments to be inspired and what comes out on the other side, we'll figure it out. We'll figure it out. And so that has really been a central goal of mine. To think about what it means to take that practice, with that engagement and think about the multiplicity of tools and ways and deliveries that we can make our ideas and our stories real and accessible for whoever encounters them.

SW: I know you graduated from a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and your research focuses on the histories and narratives of HBCUs. Can you talk more about this research and how your current research intervenes and extends the histories of rhetoric and composition as a field?

KLS: Yeah, I did attend an HBCU. I attended Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Mississippi. Really most proud of that experience and somewhat as I'm pausing as I speak, it's because I'm still shocked somewhat at the ways in which that one educational experience or chapter has reshaped not only my own view of intellectual possibility, but also has shaped my career. I can go into so many ways, but I'll focus on the way that the research projects and my current projects are really thinking about HBCUs in meaningful ways.

When I was a student at Tougaloo, I had to take this course as a first-year student and it was called Mission Involvement. Much like the title kind of indicates, the goal was to help students figure out how to be involved and engaged. There was mission that the college was on to make sure that we did not get lost in the weeds. And so in that course, we had to read a book called *Mississippi, the View from Tougaloo*, pretty standard historical text, a little over 250 pages. And it really chronicled the college's history from founding in 1869 until the late 1960s, early 1970s. And it was an act of institutional pride...the course was and the idea of including the book was we're going to help you understand this history and in understanding the history, you will understand why you should be here and you should be involved because you're a part of some

larger legacy and thus some larger future. And this was a part of the college's mission. The tagline is "Tougaloo College, Where History Meets the Future."

And so, as a first-year student, I was like, I bought it. I was like, I am so proud to attend this college in this state of Mississippi who has had a troubled and fraught history with Black education and look at all the things this amazing college has done. I still believe those things but when I graduated, I reread the book. Five years later, I reread the book for the first time. I was just like, no, this is interesting. I have a question here, what about this? And so I read it again, my second year of my Master's program, because I'm now working on my Master's thesis. I'm saying to myself that I'm going to write this literacy narrative. My Master's thesis was this literacy narrative on Black women pedagogues and how they'd really shaped me, I think I called it a "literacy trio." I was trying to come up with, I guess I was really developing my pedagogical vision at that point.

So I reread the book a second time. I was just like, where are the students? How did we write an entire college's history and we only talked about the students who became doctors, lawyers, senators, gave back to the college and so forth? I just sat with it. I did not know then that that would become my dissertation, but it did. And so I read it again. A part of this project is about rereading, what happens at different points when you reread a text? Or when you engage it, what do you now see that you did not see before? What are you allowing yourself to see or unsee? Or what are you even making allowances for as it relates to the construction of an institutional narrative?

When I wrote the dissertation, I was so focused on this idea of figuring out this book, who wrote this book? And why did they write it this way? I had no idea that in completing the dissertation and taking some time to breathe, because post writing a dissertation you need to breathe and you need to sleep. So I slept and I took some deep breaths and I just couldn't shake it. I was like, you know what? I'm going to keep this going. So from that kind of focus on who wrote this book and why did they write this book this way, I've now really evolved to this larger question of, what I like to call frames of oblivion and what happens with oblivion as it circulates memory and history. And truly this kind of central question of what happens with and to the information that we don't know that we don't know? It never fails that I'm in conversations with folks who are still asking the question, what is an HBCU?

Some of that is a very linguistic thing. They have no idea what the initialism is actually describing, but then even on a deeper level, they have no conception of the place that this very small corner of US higher education has. And so maybe if I said something like Spellman or Morehouse or Howard, they would be able to make an association, but not in this larger kind of construction in historical reality, that is the HBCU reality. So my research is really thinking about the institutional narrative genre, which is what I'm calling these kind of writings around institutions' histories and how they represent and construct institutional narratives. So this is a very clear rhetorical intervention. And what messaging is used to present a particular narrative and why. Who is it attempting to protect? Who is it serving? What is it advancing?

As I get closer to understanding that concept, what I really come to understand is this larger construction of HBCU pride, which is what that initial project or mission was for that course that I took my first year at Tougaloo, that there is this attempt to promote pride. I would argue a distancing from the realities and memories of slavery. I think that that becomes a mission of HBCU pride. It becomes a mission of what I begin to characterize as HBCU literacies, what kind of action and meaning making possibilities or explorations result from these pride endeavors? So I'm really excited about this project. It's becoming...I guess as Alice Walker would describe, it's becoming my own hilly project to figure out how I'm understanding pride and shame and other affective realities of Blackness in a US context.

But it's also, I believe, an opportunity for fields like rhetoric and composition or writing studies or even just to think the academy writ large to really grapple with what is happening with the larger histories of education that we are working within and what opportunities we have to revise futures and to offer resources and possibilities to spaces that have not been allowed. And this is not me thinking about kind of bridge programs or opportunities for projects or programs, but rather saying what happens when we use our expertise, our engagement with historiography, our kind of usage of writing studies to push back against rehearsals and omissions and say that now we're going to move that to the spaces that we're talking to.

So this is a very action based project that's making me turn to some digital public humanities type work in hopes of building a digital archive of Tougaloo voices. I hope to start at Tougaloo and use it as a model for other HBCUs to say that there's a curriculum possibility here for us to begin to collect the narratives of HBCUs, starting with that first year. That there's something to be said about the time that we allow to lapse before we begin to pin a institution's narrative. That we're waiting for some level of success or notoriety to represent things when we can actually think about this as a process that in process there's much to be gained from the literacy practices that are circulating. I'm most excited about this project. I'm writing and I tried to keep writing, but I had to pause very often to kind of sit with the things that are becoming undone for me, within me, in hopes of moving forward a beautiful, meaningful project.

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