

Episode 89: Louis M. Maraj

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Louis M. Maraj about antiracist pedagogies and practices, theorizing and centering Blackness and Black feminism, and notions of Blackness in historically White institutions.

A native of Trinidad and Tobago, Louis M. Maraj thinks, creates, and converses with/through theoretical Black studies, rhetoric, digital media, and critical pedagogies. His scholarship specifically addresses anti/racism, anti/Blackness, and expressive form. Maraj's book *Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics* explores everyday notions of Blackness in historically white institutions. His recent essays appear in *Prose Studies*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, and *Self+Culture+Writing*. He is an assistant professor in University of British Columbia's School of Journalism, Writing, and Media and co-founder of DBLAC (Digital Black Lit and Composition), an inter-institutional network of Black scholars in language-related fields.

Lou, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about your approach to teaching writing. Do you mind talking about your pedagogical values and what activities you use or draw from in the writing classroom to support these pedagogical goals?

LM: So, before I respond, I also want to thank you for having me here. I appreciate the interest in my work, as well as the time and space that you offer with this podcast that's dedicated to thinking about and having important conversations about pedagogy. I also want to acknowledge that I am speaking to you from the ancestral, unseated and occupied lands of the Musqueam people, a place of learning for those peoples for centuries before us.

I would say that at the crux of my pedagogy is a deep engagement with the ways that writing and power are entangled. I try to open up every learning space. I enter to thinking about positionality and the relationships between systems of power and individual and communal spaces. This is framed by or born by Black feminist thoughts and theoretical Black studies, particularly ideas about how the experiences are intimately related to meaning making, the importance of dialogue, orienting oneself to accountability, and understanding presence as in involving a host of meetings beyond a particular body in a particular space.

Yeah, so I can specifically speak to sort of one thing that I always do at the beginning of every class or every sort of pedagogical learning space that I enter, is an activity about writing and its relationship to power. If this is within the framework of sort of a class team, there's usually reading that we do from Audre Lorde. "Poetry is Not a Luxury" is one of those readings. There's another essay called "Poet as Teacher," I believe it's something like that. It's a very short essay

about the relationship between a writer and a teacher, and making the argument that writers are teachers.

So we start from there to thinking about how writing is, at heart, an exchange of power, doing sort of a paraphrase of what that phrase means. Usually what happens, what flows out of that, is the idea of power being this really difficult thing to define. We then work through to think about what are systems of power and making a huge list of how systems of power, what systems of power exist in our lives. And then move to think about what are some identities that develop out of those systems because of how those systems allow access to some people or what we might think of as privilege, and how it denies access to some people, what we might think of as marginalization. At that moment is where we think deeply with the idea of lived experience as a criterion of meaning. That's sort of an idea from Patricia Hill Collins's work on Black feminist thought.

We do work to think about where we are located within those systems via the identity categories that we pointed out. So we think about moments where we understood or came to know about our access to particular systems of power, and/or experiences where we were denied access or marginalized by those systems of power. I share with my students, my own stories about this while they're sharing their stories about this, as a way to think about orienting ourselves to what accountability and to complicating the notion of presence as just a body in a particular space. This is one way that we are orienting ourselves thinking about various sort of intersectional identities or relationality between different people in different spaces within different power systems and how those things all work.

SW: Let's talk about your book, Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics. In it you explore notions of Blackness in White institutional spaces and you theorize Black identity. Can you walk us through what you're doing throughout this book?

LM: Yeah, for sure. So, the book is about fluidity or rhetorical fluidity and how that relates to Blackness in White institutional spaces particularly. I'm looking at notions of Blackness in historically White educational institutions to offer these four rhetorics or modalities of meaning making that Black students, staff and instructors might use to do antiracism. And those four are autoethnography, hashtagging, Black inter-contextual reading, and something I call rhetorical reclamation or reconceptualized disruption.

The book is taking on different orientations and looking through these different modalities and thinking about these. So it starts off with me telling my own story of arriving in the United States and understanding the violence of writing classrooms while also understanding the violence of race and racism, particularly in the U.S. context, and how violence easily circulates in these historically White educational spaces. I then jump into thinking deeply about my own positionality in relationship to what I'm studying.

So, the first chapter really is doing two things: Catching a genealogy within rhetoric and writing studies of Black autoethnographic work and studies that have come before me to sort of acknowledge that the lineage that I'm contributing to. And also talking about my life experiences through engagement with different points of my education in the United States, talking about,

looking at the way that my image is used for sort of diversity initiatives or to represent diversity, the experiences I've had in classrooms, graduate classrooms, being particularly told or having my Blackness questioned. The chapter's called "Are You Black, Though?" So it's about having a Black student constantly ask that question, "How could I be Black if I'm in front of a classroom at a White university?" And also thinking about sort of the violence of experiences that I've had in sort of on and off campus spaces, where I was attacked by a vigilante, and then another instance attacked by the police near a White campus where I was teaching.

I move then with that framework to thinking about my classroom or thinking a little bit deeper about my classroom practices in chapter two, where I'm thinking about hashtagging. So, that chapter is really based on a particular assignment that I deploy, thinking about hashtags as a form of marginalized literacy for Black people, understanding the framework of how social media is used as a mechanism to highlight social change and to make racial meaning in particular ways. And then asking students to think with hashtags or think of hashtags as kind of a remediated version of a common place or a commonplace book. In that chapter, I'm looking particularly at my students' work or my former students' work, and looking at their use of hashtags in reading, doing sort of rhetorical analysis only through tagging, especially with a backdrop of movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and other kinds of movements.

In the third chapter, I'm looking at what I'm describing as Black inter-contextual reading, drawing on notions of inter-contextual reading from Wendy S. Hesford and Arjun Appadurai. Particularly I'm reading the Black Lives Matter movement in this chapter. I'm looking at the way that Black Lives Matter draws on a number of different contexts in the ways that it makes racial meaning in relation to social justice. So I'm reading three particular artifacts, but I'm also reading artifacts around those artifacts to think deeply about out how they're coming up against each other to make meaning. I'm doing this as sort of an inter-context with the rest of the project, to thinking about the White institutions.

In the fourth chapter, I move to thinking more deeply about policies and the implementation and practice of policies. What I'm doing is looking at diversity initiatives. I'm also looking at policing, campus security, White supremacist flyers that are circulating. I'm doing all this and the context is 2016, which is pretty ripe for this kind of material to be floating around. So, and I'm also looking at student protests, students of color protesting the institution for different reasons. In this chapter, I look particularly at the ways that these White institutions use or edit their sort of security mechanisms to particularly represent Blackness as criminality. Through different kinds of alerts, messages that are sent about crimes, et cetera, the institution creates representations of Blackness as sort of a criminal entity without actually explicitly admitting to doing that or explicitly doing that.

The book ends with a conclusion, which is personally my favorite part of the book, that meditates on what this all means for Blackness to think about all of these ways of meaning making through different philosophical frameworks, what it means to be Black in a violent space. And so, in that chapter, I'm really playing with language. I'm playing with language a lot throughout the book. So there are poems with different uses of both Black U.S. vernacular, but also Trini English, Trinidadian dialect. But in the particular last chapter, I'm really thinking about

how Blackness might be thought of as something that is fluid, and fluid in a way can be thought of through different frames to make meaning that pushes against racist systems of power.

SW: Thanks, Lou. It's such a rich book, and I would encourage everyone to read it. I think it really adds to conversations on antiracism in scholarship. I highlighted this quote, for example, which I think shows in some ways its contributions to larger conversations and to teaching writing: "To center Blackness and Black feminism not only means being conscious about the content of our Black study, but also involves political citation practices as well as cognizance of the schools of thought we resort to for theorizing." So I think one addition you make throughout this book is how you draw on Black experiences and theory across philosophies of Blackness from Caribbean, African, and Black U.S. authors, which is really strategic and important. Could you talk more about this and how you center these different histories and theories and cultures in the writing classroom through curriculum?

LM: One of the things that I'm trying to do and think deeply about is the way that...or I'm thinking deeply about it, but I'm pushing against the thought that Blackness is one particular thing, or it might be representative and understood as one particular thing, one static thing. Because that understanding of Blackness is how White institutions pick it up and use it to their advantage, use it for anti-Black violence really. So what I do in the book is to really think about how Blackness has been theorized through a number of different frameworks. I'm thinking about African Indigenous research practices. There's stuff about this in the introduction and chapter one, thinking about all of our particular relationships to how identity and identity narratives are important to that, and some Black theoretical frameworks that understand the relationships between sort of identity, systems of power, and all their various sort of formations or mechanisms. Also, how Black peoples have found ways to resist that and to make fluid meaning in the resistance of that.

And so, the way that's happening and drawing from all these different traditions, and trying to sort of allow space to think, for them to think with each other, is a move to do something that is undisciplining in all of its senses, in terms of discipline as a field and discipline as a verb, and open up space for the undisciplining of thought, the undisciplining of language, which is why I'm not writing the entire book in one particular version of English or one particular linguistic orientation.

And so, in terms of how that comes to the classroom, for me, it really enters that space by 1) thinking about different voices, and not only thinking about different voices in a particular vacuum, but engaging with what are the backgrounds of the particular authors, what are the subject positions, historical time period, et cetera, particular different authors, what are the subject positions of the people in the classrooms. Really, if I might go back to that particular activity I described, one of the purposes of that is to really think about the ways in which systems of power dole out resources in ways that create a binary understanding of identity. But identity does not operate through those binaries. Experience doesn't operate through those identities.

So, when we get to the point that we're talking about our own experiences and our own identities, what kind of bubbles to the top of that conversation is: How are we dissolving notions, static notions of what it means to be X kind of person? And for me, that's what doing antiracism is. It's

understanding that there are particular racialized tropes that are doing this, doing work to race and racialize people in particular ways that are operating in the world. Antiracism is really about the undoing of race or racist tropes and what we understand to be a particular kind of racial categorization, or gender categorization, or categorization based on nationality, language, ability or disability, et cetera.

SW: In your book, you ask this question: "How do Black people make everyday meaning in an antiBlack world" I thought that we could end with this question and you thinking through your own experiences. How do you go about navigating White institutional spaces? And how do you encourage other Black colleagues to move within and between this world?

LM: I'll respond by saying that I don't think there is any particular answer to this question, which is why it sort of fuels what I do and try to think about. But I would say on sort of a day-to-day dealing with the White academy that I guess how I encourage folks to explore and deal with it is on their own terms, really, knowing what those terms are. And again, this goes back to subject position and positionality, and what one's experiences are, and what presences one is bringing to a particular space. But knowing what those terms are and knowing how they relate to the terms of others one is engaging with. I'm saying terms to mean both a particular kind of orientation to an idea, but also a particular kind of orientation to language. I want to imagine a world where folks can speak whatever it is that they understand to be their languages, to also do that while engaging a space in ways that they're doing so on their own, from whatever place they see themselves.

And so it's not a clean answer to those questions. It's not a clear-cut answer. But I think this is a question that has to continuously be asked because one of the things that happens...and this is why I started by talking about how the book is about rhetorical fluidity. One of the things that happens as soon as a notion of Blackness is sort of made known as something that is culturally associated with Black people, it gets packaged and sold. And this is a long history. So the takeaway is embracing a kind of a fluidity for Blackness, understanding how Blackness is something that moves and flows and cannot be contained in one particular frame or one particular static understanding.

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