

Episode 109: Tamika L. Carey

Transcript

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

In this episode, Tamika L. Carey talks about cultural rhetorics, African American rhetorics, teaching Black women's writing at a predominantly White institution (PWI), rhetorical impatience, and rhetorical healing and wellness.

Tamika L. Carey is an interdisciplinary scholar and teacher whose work focuses on African American Rhetorics and Literacies, Feminist Rhetorics, Black Women's Writing and Intellectual Traditions, and the memoir. She is the author of *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood* (SUNY 2016), a project that earned her the 2019 Inaugural Book Series Scholar Award by DBLAC. Her essays appear in venues such as *Rhetoric Review*, *Enculturation*, *Signs*, and *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. She is currently an Associate Professor of English, a Faculty Affiliate in the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, and a Donchian-Casteen Fellow in the Institute of Practical Ethics and Public Life at the University of Virginia.

Tamika, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your research and teaching focus on cultural rhetorics, African American rhetorics, feminist rhetorics, and Black women's intellectual histories and writing traditions. Do you mind talking more about your approach to teaching writing and what this looks in the classroom?

TC: I entered graduate school with some background as a high school English teacher. During my time, I was able to study cultural rhetoric traditions and feminist rhetoric traditions. And those two lines of research allowed me to develop new questions about African American rhetorics and Black women's writing. Namely, I was able to interrogate the spaces where a lot of knowledge making was happening. I developed frameworks for understanding the literacies that could be taking place in sites like the Black church. I developed critical ways to think about extracurricular forms of instruction. We might now call them "social construction," but you know, I come from traditions where maybe we would call it "home training." So to develop that apparatus of looking at these messages, these lines of argument, certain genre formations, that allowed me to really make a home site for my research and to really think deeply about what are the consequences of the messages that circulate within and beyond Black communities.

I kind of love to think about hard questions like what's being served, you know, how is a community being formed and sustained by this particular text. So with that kind of research orientation, one of the ways that it translates into my teaching is that we are going to think about subject formation a lot. Subject formation for the individual, as well as the community. The kind of dominant discourse and invisible but equally potent messages that go into shaping how we understand who we are. And then we move from there and think about action, making

knowledge, and community sustaining resources. We study histories of rhetoric in my undergraduate African American rhetoric classes. We walk sometimes all the way from Equiano up to Kamala Harris. We think about the rhetorical traditions that these writers and rhetors and speakers are invoking to do.

In my African American women's rhetoric classes, we do a similar work. I think those are often a little bit more critical because I'm bringing an explicit feminist lens to that particular class. It's evident in my AfAm rhetoric class as well, but I do have a little bit of a different set of objectives for myself when I'm teaching Black women's writing and rhetoric. So one of the ways that I've articulated that critical focus, both in my research as well as in my teaching, is to look for the rhetorical consequence of a message. I think when you are working with particularly undergrad communities, it's important, especially if you have a class that would be categorized as a cultural rhetoric class, to challenge students to think about, oh, you know, these lines or these film that I watch over and over again, they are having a consequence in how my community functions and conceives of itself. We move again from action knowledge, community sustaining, and also consequence.

SW: Tamika, do you mind sharing some texts or assignments you use in your African American women's rhetorics class? You mentioned positionality and identity, so I'm really interested in how students at UVA, which I believe is a pretty large PWI engage with these texts and assignments. Maybe you could talk more about how you frame that class and guide those discussions given your institutional context?

TC: Absolutely. You know, I just referred to it as African American women's rhetorics, but it's on the books as Black women's writing and rhetoric. That is a class that I first developed at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and I've been evolving it through different institutions. I was thinking about this recently in different institutions, the class has functioned slightly differently when I was working for the smaller UNC campus school at Pembroke, we focused a lot on histories of Black women's writing. When I got to the University at Albany, it seemed like we were doing much more with theory. I had a complete assignment on the curriculum of Audre Lorde. So we looked at *Sister Outsider* as an essay that works within Jacqueline Jones Royster's concept of literacy as sociopolitical action. We had students take each chapter and kind of expand and look at how is this a curriculum that is promoting a kind of Black women's radical feminist thought? And what are the rhetorics that go into the writing circulation and consequence of that?

I was doing that work before I brought this class to the University of Virginia. But it's interesting that you acknowledge that UVA is a very large PWI. It does not have a high number of African American students. I remember the first time that I taught Black women's writing and rhetoric in my second semester. I felt a real responsibility to design the class in a way where I acknowledge the challenges of the undergrads in this space. So we did the same kind of work that we do in the other iterations. We start by reading *The Color Purple* as a literacy narrative. We then back up and we learn rhetoric by looking at Shirley Wilson Logan's *With Pen and Voice*. You know,

we're reading Ida B. Wells. We're reading Anna Julia Cooper. We're studying the rhetorical traditions. We move all the way up to Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, some of those figures, Angela Davis, June Jordan, some of your radical feminists of the seventies. We go to hip hop feminism, we're reading Joan Morgan. We bring in some Roxane Gay and others to look at the memoir as, again, a literate text.

But the assignment that I developed for that group that I've been writing about recently is to cultivate a wellness kit because it occurred to me...these are students, it was 2019, some of the challenges of UVA are still fresh in their minds, how can we use writing as a mechanism to understand and support themselves? I asked them to develop a wellness kit where they collected literature, they collected objects, they collected or they found organizations and resources. And they put all of that together into a website for a targeted audience. I was riffing off of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* in the title of that assignment. I got back these projects from students like, "for Black Wahoo's who are studying at a PWI for the first time." These students had cultivated these kits where they went out and they were finding the literature, they were talking to students, they were interviewing. And I love that project because it allowed them to take ownership of their experience, to think through what they would need to survive and to survive well, to document and articulate the value of all these objects and to forecast when they should be used. I saw that as a really useful literacy activity to have them look down the road based on where they are and who they are, and to predict what they would need. And to write this as a public facing text for an audience. So that's one of my favorite assignments for that class. I have some others, but that one is close to my heart.

SW: Your article, "Necessary Adjustments: Black Women's Rhetorical Impatience" was published in Rhetoric Review in 2020. I want to read this quote from it. You write, "Impatience can be righteous indignation, a liberation vehicle aimed at rejecting symbols used to preserve and project white supremacy over and onto the lives of Black citizens." This quote really stood out to me because I think it's important for what you're doing throughout this article. I was hoping that maybe you could talk a little more about how you're using rhetorical impatience in this piece and how rhetorics of impatience reflect knowledge making practices and traditions?

TC: That line that you just read came from the section on Bree Newsome. I found her to be a really useful figure for thinking about what happens when Black women just become fatigued. And that fatigue seems to boil up because they are positioned in these entrenched states of the status quo. You know Bree Newsome just got tired and climbed up and took down the Confederate flag. She felt empowered to do so from an understanding that...time's up, you know, like why is this flag still flying over the state house? So thinking about those moments of just becoming fatigued to the point of exhaustion and trying to manipulate time is some of the work that I was doing in that article. Bree Newsome is one figure. I was also looking at Maxine Waters' viral moment of reclaiming my time and how the Congresswoman was really empowered to exercise something of a boss persona in those Senate hearings and in those congressional hearings. I wanted to, again, put that in a lineage of activism in order to think about when time is not moving, or when conditions are not changing fast enough for the

sensibilities and the sense of justice that a group has. I'm hoping to push back against any illusion that there's a progress narrative. One of the arguments that I try to make is that impatience reflects a particular type of consciousness, an unapologetic stance, a form of indignation and audacity, the sense that justice is already late. And if certain groups are just waking up to that and I have to hurt their feelings or do something that is not coded as civil in order to raise attention and consciousness, so be it. It's a necessary adjustment.

SW: And "Necessary Adjustments" seems like a slight departure from one of your other recent lines of research. I'm thinking here about your essay, "A Tightrope of Perfection: The Rhetoric and Risk of Black Women's Intellectualism on Display in Television and Social Media." What brought you to that project? And how has that research informed your teaching?

TC: Well, you know, "Necessary Adjustments" kind of interrupted some of the work that I had started to undertake after publishing *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*. Coming out of that project, I was really intrigued by intrigued and scared...I should say about the backlash that I was observing a lot of outspoken Black women intellectuals experiencing both in television and social media and in other venues. So watching the political scientist and professor Melissa Harris-Perry essentially be called to deliver an apology, felt like an opening for me as a ration to think about what are the consequences when you have a group that is, in many ways, historically marginalized...they have these public platforms, but they receive death threats for what they're saying. Yet at the same time expected to perform and deliver public contrition as an apology. So in "A Tightrope of Perfection," I wanted to study what is error, you know? Is error functioning the same way for Black women? What seems to galvanize an audience to feel like they can take a punitive stance, and then what are the kind of logics and rhetorical violence that they commit when they want to pull someone into a place of issuing an apology?

That has been dirty and uncomfortable work simply because it does expose me to the racialized dynamics of accountability and call out culture and cancel culture. And that is a project that I am still undertaking in my research. One of the ways that I am bringing it into my teaching, though, is to address it from a different standpoint rather than having my undergrads and my students actually look at call out culture, because again, I'm not going to participate in traumatic experiences for my students, instead, I designed a class called Writing Regret and Repair because I wanted to think about the conception that an apology can be actually healing.

I think there's a number of scholars, Aaron Lazare and others who have made that claim. For me, a bridge between the first book and this one is whether an apology can be healing. And to interrogate that question, we've started studying vulnerability, shame, regret, and remorse. So with first-years at the University of Virginia, I'm currently reading Brené Brown and Erving Goffman and Harriet Lerner. We are taking an identity-based approach to studying these large concepts of, you know, who's made to feel more regretful in our culture? What are some of the benign but clear mechanisms of punishment? And then what would it look like to issue an effective apology? I must say it's some of the most profound teaching that I've undertaken today.

Some of my first-years...one of their assignments have been interviewing friends and family and other people who have experienced regret. And the data that they're coming back to me with has been just profound. For example, I have a first-year who decided that she wanted to interview her mother who lost a friendship. Her mother decided to study for the bar exam rather than go to her best friend's wedding. That friendship dissolved. My student interviews her mom and my student was able to come back and say, sometimes we prioritize temporary identities, you know, a contextual identity as a prospective lawyer over a long term identity as a friend.

I thought, wow, this is a first semester, first-year. Those insights make me happy. I'm looking at regret and it's just been useful to bring students into this question and ask them to think of themselves as researchers and to turn them loose and have them come back with these insights.

SW: Do you think you could speak more to those insights from students, for example, how we measure sincerity in an apology or even process authenticity in these kinds of rhetorical actions and responses?

TC: Yeah, and this is why the second unit of the class has been so fun for me because I decided, "Okay, this is going to be the unit where we actually study the rhetoric of apologies." And as an application of that, I collected all these case studies of public apologies, and I emphasized, okay, we're dealing with public figures, so keep that in mind...but I had them break into groups and you know study a Taylor Swift apology and Ellen DeGeneres apology, the Gayle King apology, and the things that they came back with when they were looking at these apologies as responses to another speech act or another error has been really useful because they've started to think about motives, social things of that nature. It's interesting how critical so many of them are, but at the same time, why would I say it's interesting? Our young people are very awake to the world, but yeah, reading them as responsive speech acts has been illuminating.

And this has been something else that I've had to refine in my pedagogy because teaching Writing Regret and Repair as a first-year class within our rubric here at UVA...a writing identities kind of framework, I spend maybe the first five weeks of the class developing critical terminology for thinking of ourselves as citizens in the world. One of the challenges that it poses to students as they are interpreting these moments is to detach themselves a bit from these people that they might want to forgive, that they might want to rationalize behaviors. I have to say, "Wait a minute, you're a researcher, you know, I need you to be able to write and to critically assess, even if you're talking about the actions of someone really, really close to you," and that's been a productive challenge for the students, especially those that always want to interview a parent. And I tell them, you know, you're writing about your dad. This is going to be a challenge. But by the end of the class, the tension between writing about people who make mistakes in the everyday that are very close to you versus analyzing a celebrity, I would like to think it makes them a little bit more aware, but also just a little bit more sympathetic and empathetic to people that make mistakes.

SW: This is my last question. Your book, Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood is about Black women's literacy, Black feminism, healing and wellness, and education. I was hoping to give you some space and time to talk about your motivations for writing this book and what you hope readers and teachers and students will take away from it.

TC: You know, I was having a conversation yesterday in my graduate seminar on Black women's rhetorics about the tension of critiquing these messages that circulate within your communities. I referenced the late bell hook's book *Yearning* and how she does talk about sometimes that challenge of speaking to that which is so close to you. That was one of the tensions that I wanted to explore in *Rhetorical Healing*. Books like *The Color Purple* and *For Colored Girls*, they were entrenched in the reading lives of my mom and my aunts as a child. So 10 years, 15 years later, when there's the emergence of this industry of all of these books that appear to respond back to the narratives of Walker and Morrison and Shange, I thought what a way to both theorize how Black writers respond to crisis within their communities, how they devise learning curricula and how they develop genres and books that would attract and intervene in the problems of Black women, but also what a challenge and a mandate to think critically about what these arguments and these discourse do and what they invite when they circulate and kind of crossover.

It's the work of theorizing what's at home, but asking the consequences of it, and then also tracing the circulation beyond just the contained spaces of Black communities. I've been thinking a lot recently about these lay relationship teachers that seem to be all over the place on TikTok and on YouTube. And I was thinking, yes, maybe I should revisit this in light of someone like Kevin Samuels, who has built the whole platform on teaching and rating Black women in terms of being high quality or not. It's not necessarily healing, but I could see some of the adoption of the same rhetorical strategies. And so if anything, I hope *Rhetorical Healing* as a critical project makes us more acute of when patterns and strategies can be hijacked. But also as a life project, I just want to keep thinking about what it means to be well and to you know, focus on care.

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