

## **Spark Volume 2 Interview: Dr. Eric Darnell Pritchard**

### **Full Transcript:**

Hello. This is Eric Darnell Pritchard, Associate Professor of English at the University of Buffalo, responding to a set of questions being posed by *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal* special issue looking at the emergence and impact of Black studies since 1969. And I'm just going to read each of the questions and respond to them.

### **The first is “what does the emergence of Black studies as a recognized area of study mean for you”?**

So, this is a complex question because centering “recognition,” and I'm putting scare quotes around that, I think takes the term as a destination to which Black Studies, or really any discipline has or must arrive. Which may bring one to ask, recognized by whom? And perhaps also recognize, to what end?

Recognition, which I think includes inherently visibility, has always been for Black folk, women, trans folk, queer folks and others who are historically and contemporarily marginalized, a sword that is slicing in two opposing directions, and those two directions yield positive and negative effects. That is, recognition can be a mode of visibility through which individuals - or in this case, a field or a discipline – has achieved a kind of historical, contemporary, intellectual, educational legibility that it didn't necessarily previously enjoy. So in this sense, the emergence of Black Studies, when the seer is one who recognizes Black Studies that is something that invested unequivocally in the freedoms of all Black people, is more likely to reflect a recognition wherein its scholarly, pedagogical, and communal projects are fully committed to Black Studies as an experiment in the possible. This means the work of Black Studies, regardless of recognition, is incomplete and sees that work as critiquing itself and remaking itself from the inside out.

But in the other sense, is the emergence into a recognized area can mean becoming legible to institutions and individuals who are not necessarily invested in the long arch of Black Studies as a freedom project. Rather, this would be the recognition that achieves a legibility through a grammar that is announcing its recognition and emergence as it is simultaneously announcing that the work of Black Studies is already complete. That is, the recognition of Black Studies occurs in terms that suggest that it's a “mission accomplished” – also, quotes around that—a job complete and well done, even as white supremacy, poverty, cisnormativity, sexism, misogyny, ableism, and other matters are negatively affecting Black people, and as active and crushing of those individuals and those communities as it always has been, and inequalities and institutional violence and social harm continue to run rampant. In these instances, then, being recognized is a form of institutionalizing one's invisibility and silencing misrecognized disciplines or fields as a form of equity, justice, power, and change. And this is something that resonates with Roderick Ferguson's book *The Reorder of Things*, where essentially, amongst many great arguments being shown in that book, one of the takeaways for me that Ferguson shows is that when it comes to ethnic studies, there really are no

disinterested parties. That institutions are very adept at learning and then leveraging the languages of diversity, equity, inclusion, ethnic studies—and that would include Black Studies, gender and sexuality studies—leveraging the languages, vocabularies, the grammars of those fields towards ends that are actually counter-revolutionary and against the sort of radical intention and birth of those fields.

Put more plainly, Black Studies for me has meant the occasion of recommitting myself to the radical imperative of the project that has always been and will always be found in sharpening established and fashioning new categories of analysis that draw our attention to the most vulnerable among us, illuminating where Black Studies has been useable, but also how it can and must do better. This is a cue and practice I take from queer Black feminisms, and specifically here I want to cite June Jordan, who wrote in her essay “A New Politics of Sexuality”—an essay that I think of as getting me free both personally and politically—she writes that “freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all.” And she also has another essay, that is an essay on children’s literature that was first published in the anthology *Revolutionary Mothering* where she says that “Love is life force.” And love—this ethics of love, this notion of freedom as something that we can’t separate for some and ignore for others, is really the Black Studies mission to which I am committed.

**The second question is: How would you define the field of Black Studies, especially in relationship to rhetoric, literacy, and writing studies?**

Within literacy, rhetoric, and writing studies, I define Black Studies as an interdiscipline of scholarship, pedagogies, creative, and public works that see the language and communicative practices of people of African ascent - that means for me the entire Black diaspora - as essential to composition and rhetoric achieving its full potential as an intellectual, pedagogical, and civic enterprise. This full potential includes achieving or committing itself unequivocally to the work that language and communicative practices bring to realizing equity, justice, and liberation for all. For example, that would mean, or could mean that literacy, rhetoric, and writing studies is being devoted to antiracism, and doing the courageous but difficult work of exorcising the realities and practices of racism - which include antiblackness in all forms - from its scholarly and pedagogical practices, but also, in its departments, programs, professional organizations, and publications (and I want to bookmark here journals, book series, conferences, all of those things, matter and count to what I’m saying here). And I want to be clear that checking antiblackness, in a Black queer feminist view which informs all of who I am personally and everything I do professionally, sees actions of cisnormativity, transphobia, sexism, misogyny, transmisogyny, ableism, heterosexism, homophobia, xenophobia and other forms of systemic violence and social harm, as expressions of antiblackness and antithetical to antiracism, since all of those actions also affect Black people. As such, *for me*, anyone claiming Black Studies that is not committed to that work, *in my view*, is not doing Black Studies. Rather, they are simply leveraging race and Blackness toward ends that are oppressive, marginalizing, and ultimately antihuman. So I also define Black Studies in literacy, rhetoric, and writing studies as

work that is “community-accountable,” which queer Black feminist community educator Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs defines as the work that we do that reflects the communities we say we love and who make us and everything we do possible. This is an energy and a practice that, in my view, is central to the definition and practice of Black Studies generally, and in literacy, rhetoric, and writing studies in particular.

### **Third question: How does your research fit in a Black Studies genealogy?**

My research fits within a Black Studies genealogy by situating itself in the work of Black queer feminist scholars, who each entered the landscape of Black Studies with total gratitude, love, and care for where the conversation was when they entered it, and what all those earlier dialogues made possible, but at the same time, chose to do the necessary *self-work*—really, and then also the scholarly work, the pedagogical work, and building of communal connections to then approach that landscape with new questions, with new vocabularies, and as a result they were yielding new perspectives, though all of it being part of that same original work of Black Studies and its commitment to the liberation of *all* people and the vanquishing of racism and antiblackness everywhere, and all of the other isms and phobias that affect Black people in their lives. That is something that Black Studies has had to grow into. It does not happen, or did not happen just because Black studies came into existence and as it continues to grow into that—and I believe that queer Black feminist scholars and pedagogues, which includes a wide range of people including folks in feminist theory, queer theory, disability justice—for me, it has offered the language and concepts that have most helped me to find my way, but also, have left us with some of the most useable language through which Black Studies will be able to operate self-reflexively and to check itself and continue to grow for many years to come. And that’s a choice that people have to make. I wanna stress that. For example, the concept and practice of intersectionality, which I think in many respects is kind of in danger, in my view, of being oversimplified from the radical intentions that we still need to be accountable for—of Crenshaw’s first theorization. It still offers us so much as a self-reflexive practice, a practice to check ourselves as people who do Black Studies, but also as a mode of creation—of creating Black Studies as a field—the interdiscipline of our dreams. That is where I see my work fitting in here, as both someone who is someone who is emerging through that genealogy, and still hoping to make my contribution to that work.

### **Question four: From which Black Studies scholars do you find inspiration? Which Black Studies scholars do you return to repeatedly?**

That’s a lot of question. Put simply—this is my sort of big umbrella response—I find inspiration in the work of *all* Black queer feminist scholars past and present. Full stop. But, to be more specific, I consider myself an ancestor-led and community-accountable scholar and teacher, so within Black Studies generally, I most often return to the work of ancestors such as Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, Pat Parker, Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, and Marlon Riggs, as well as elders such as the Combahee River Collective. In terms of contemporary scholarship—so many people, but the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster, Beverly Moss, Barbra Smith, Jewelle Gomez, Carmen

Kynard, Alexis DeVeaux, Elaine Richardson, Valerie Kinloch, Roderick Ferguson, E. Patrick Johnson, Alexis Pauline Gumbs (as I mentioned), Ruth Nicole Brown, Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor—these are people who I'm thinking of as I'm glancing at my book case now. They're essential to my current book project on community-accountable literacies and Black queer feminist pedagogies in the 70s and 80s and early 90s. But I also work in the area of fashion and performance—specifically fashion rhetoric and fashion literacies, so people like Tanisha C. Ford (a Historian), Carol Tulloch, Monica Miller, Elizabeth Way, Rikki Byrd, Kimberly Jenkins, these are some people who have been essential to my work on Black fashion and performance within the field of rhetoric and composition studies. And then, in general, as someone who works in the areas of Black feminist rhetorics and literacies and pedagogies, you know, I'd be remiss if I didn't also mention Gwendolyn Pough, Tamika L. Carey, April Baker-Bell, and also LaToya Sawyer, whose work really crosses a wide range of work in rhetorics, literacies, and pedagogies that pertains to Black women and girls, and Black feminisms in particular.

**Question five: Black Studies is rooted in activist action and the courage of change agents to make space for themselves and for others in academia. How have you tried to honor these origins in your work?**

I have and continue to do my very best to honor this tradition through, first and foremost paying forward the mentorship and support that I received throughout my graduate studies and my early career years. I was very fortunate to have mentors who were and are grounded in an ethics of care, justice, self and communal love, but also doing good work, and doing it from a place of action. So, to all the students, junior colleagues, and peers with whom I am fortunate enough to build community and kinship, I try to extend that to them, to the degree that I can, in whatever role, in whatever way that I am able to meet them. But I'm also introverted so I tend not to enjoy a lot of social media but I have come back to it because I see that as one way I can make myself available to people, and to do a kind of spiritual activism, because I think that's what my mentors did for me by helping me to become my best person to do the work I came here to do but also to stay well. I try to use my presence on twitter and Instagram to be a source of that light and love in the world because I understand that as being fundamentally important to our own wellness as individuals and as a community. Ultimately, healthy people can bring their best selves to the work, and to the purpose that they're here to serve in the world.

I have committed to honoring these origins by doing my best to live a courageous existence, and to do that in my research, in my scholarship, my teaching, my service, my ways of being with other people, and to do that even when other people aren't looking. And I commit myself to being courageous, *especially* because *what I know*, as Maya Angelou has said, is that courage is the most important of all the virtues because if you do not have courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently, you can practice them erratically, but not consistently. So that means that kindness, love, forgiveness, and any other virtue can only be fully actualized by my being courageous, and so I choose to step into and recommit myself to that over and over again because I understand those virtues to be essential to any activist or courageous stance that I may take for myself or other people. Finally, I have committed to honoring these origins by

telling the truth of a matter in as loving and courageous a way as I possibly can. I'm very thoughtful about how I want to show up in the world. And I'm not perfect. No human is. I do my very best to take up being as loving as I can as I'm being courageous, and that's difficult work. It's not easy. Sometimes it can mean standing for justice by yourself, and it also can mean being misunderstood by people. For any reason. There have been several controversies in the field (as we all know) in recent years involving professional organizations, which I'm a part and anyone listening to this is likely also a part, different disciplinary publications and their publication practices, and programs and departments in literacy, rhetoric, and writing, and how they have addressed (or not addressed) issues of racism, exclusion, tokenism, exploitation, citation politics, and so forth. In each of these cases, some directly involving me, and some not, what I have done is my very best to speak the truth as I see it and to be a voice for justice, even at the risk of any cost to myself personally or professionally, because I know that the perception of what I am risking is all ego and, for me, that is not a place from which to do any work worth anything, that I want to do in serving my purpose. My Black queer feminist ancestors and elders, they knew that, and they know that, and I am thankful *every day*, every minute for their example so that I can honor them by doing the same and doing the work "in spite of whatever," as my elder Dr. Hazel Symonette always says, and I carry that with me each and every day.

**Final question: What do you hope to see happen with Black Studies in rhetoric, literacy, and/or writing studies?**

Again, *so many* things. I would like to see more departments and programs in literacy, rhetoric, and composition have experts in Black Studies on their faculty, and I want to be specific and say what I mean by that is that these programs have more than one such expert on their faculty, just as they have more than one expert in other areas. The *scholars are there!* We only need the departments and programs to do the self-work as a unit and as a university to prepare the table—*not only to hire* these scholars, but to retain them, to celebrate the brilliant expertise that they bring to your faculty, and to your classrooms, to your faculty meetings [chuckles], to the committees on which they serve, the neighborhood in which they will live, and everything that they do to make your university and department better and better and better.

I would like to see more students doing work on Black Studies, and work on antiracism generally, and I'd like to see them admitted to and successfully completing MA and PhD, and MFA, you know degrees in programs of their choosing, but specifically literacy, composition, and rhetoric, since that is my discipline. Specifically, as a graduate of a historically Black college and university—The Lincoln University of Pennsylvania, the nation's oldest historically Black college and university in existence, I have to say *that* [chuckles]—I would like to see more departments and programs in literacy, rhetoric, and writing studies create pathways for students in HBCUs, students in Latinx serving institutions, Asian American students, Indigenous students, I want to see them study in our graduate programs, to complete them *successfully*, but also to complete them healthily—to not experience some of the horror stories that we've all heard and *experienced*, of what it is to be a person of color either in the professoriate or in

graduate studies, and that's *regardless* of discipline or field. And I want to see them go into whatever language and communicative work they want to do, whether that be in tenure-track life or not, community college, research institution, or go teach at an HBCU, small liberal arts college, be a community educator, a librarian—whatever it is that fulfills them, brings them joy, and brings them success, helps them to stay healthy and well, in *everything* they endeavor to do for the good, that's what I want to see happen for people who pursue Black Studies in our field.

And I would like to see more Black Studies scholars editing journals in the field, and more Black Studies scholars making up a larger size of the editorial boards of journals and book series, and also on the executive committees of professional organizations of our field, and chairing the departments of our field. Undoubtedly someone's going to listen to me saying this, and will say "But we do have X who edited this journal ... or here are these two Black Studies scholars on the board of Y journal or the head of this organization or that department" and what I am saying right now, is that that's not enough. That is only reflective of—as I've written elsewhere, a pendulum that swings back and forth between two things: our tokenization and our exploitation. Black Studies scholars need and deserve a more equitable, sustainable, and quite frankly a more pleasurable circumstance in which to serve in these positions. Otherwise, why bother? We can, as Morrison told us, not waste our time, and just do our work if the circumstances are not going to be such that serving in any way, shape or form is not going to allow us to serve our purpose and do what we're here to do.

Finally, I would like to see Black Studies acknowledged for the ways in which it has always worked to create the field that we all deserve. I want to see my ancestors and elders in this field—not the one or two whose names we know, but *all of them* celebrated for the ways they have labored to make us better, whether or not Black Studies in literacy, rhetoric, and composition was in a field that was courageous enough to do better. My ancestors, and my elders in this field—specifically Black Studies, because of the purpose of this interview, but for all people of color, specifically feminists, feminists of color, queer folks—they did their part for us to be and do better. They deserve to see the field of their dreams. That is the real thank you that we can give them. I am going to continue to labor, and work, and stay positive, and optimistic, and do everything I can with every emotional, physical time, spiritual resource I have, to make it so that as many of them get to see that in their lifetimes. That they receive that reward in their lifetime. That to me means everything.

Thank you for the opportunity to answer these great questions and I'm really excited to see, hear, read what others have to say.