

Transcript for Episode 16

Run Time: 35:52

AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer)
SD: Seth Davis (host)
ER: Elaine Richardson (special guest)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer)

Cue music “Lost Tape” by Loopez.

AH: You’re listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

SD: Recently, literacy scholar Elaine Richardson came to visit Syracuse University. During her visit, she presented her one-woman show based on her memoir *From PHD to PhD: How Education Saved My Life*. We had a chance to sit and chat about the George Zimmerman trial, the memoir itself, African American rhetoric, and even RuPaul.

SD: [*Chatter*] What was I going to say? I guess we can get, get st—

ER: [*Chatter*] We gon make it happen.

SD: [*Chatter*] Yeah, we gon make it happen. It’ll be all right.

ER: [*Singing*] Make it happen.

SD: [*Chatter*] So is it recording?

ER: [*Singing*] [*claps*] I know life can be so tough [*snaps*] and you feel like [*snaps*] givin up. [*Directed to Seth*] You remember that? [*Singing*] But you must be strong. [*claps*] Baby, [*snaps*] just hold on.

SD: Okay, here’s my first question. This is easy. *From PHD to PhD*—

ER: Oh! So we goin? We rollin?

SD: We been goin!

ER: [*Screams*] Oh noooo!

SD: We been goin.

ER: Oh no! This is the real beginning. [*laughs*]

SD: Okay. So the book, *From PHD to PhD—Po Ho on Dope—How Education Saved My Life*. Now if that don't sound like a Millie Jackson song, I don't know what does!
[laughs]

ER: I love that. I love that.

SD: But yeah! So, okay. Why your story, why now? Give me a good [snaps] exigency.

ER: I think the title is to try to be true to myself. [pause] It's where I came from, so I wanted to have that there. Especially because there's so many people that are there, and I want to *work*. You know, I want the book to *work* in the lives of people who might feel like they've been written off.

SD: Mhmm.

ER: You know, it might feel like you are just regulated or designated into a certain *life*, and you don't *have* to be.

SD: Mhmm.

ER: You know what I mean? Because everybody's got gifts and talents and dreams and stuff that they wanna be. But once people label you, that label traps you into, you know, situations and circumstances, and it doesn't have to. So that's what I was trying to go for like, "Yeah, okay, yeah, I's a po ho on dope. And you know, I admit that. And?"

SD: And? Now that we've confirmed that, now what?

ER: Yes, yes. [laughter] Okay? And so now I'm going for mine.

SD: Mhmm.

ER: I'm going for mine. I'm not letting people tell me what that po ho on dope means.

SD: Right.

ER: I'm making it what I want it to be.

SD: Mhmm.

ER: You know, I just want to be true to where I came from.

SD: What I love about it is that you really complicate a archetype or a narrative that we're very familiar with. When I first met you, one of the things I said to you—I was like, "I like you so much because you remind me of people *I know*." Specifically, you remind me of my favorite aunt. She struggled with substance abuse all her life. She actually ended up dying a couple years ago, but one of the things that I see so much of a connection

between your story and the stories that I'm familiar with is like, for instance, you're from Cleveland. I'm from Memphis. Memphis and Cleveland are both formerly thriving towns—that are black towns—but now industry has left and all that type of stuff. So there's similar things going on, but um, specifically...

I'll be honest. At parts of the presentation, I was uncomfortable *on purpose*. I know it's your purpose to make us uncomfortable, but I'ma tell you why. I'ma give you one scene in particular that I want to talk to you about.

ER: Okay.

SD: It was a rape scene.

ER: Mhmm.

SD: So you're giving us the conversation between you and the guy. And then he breaks into this...this...how do I want to say...this language of, "Ooh, let me just touch, lemme just see, lemme just do do do do." And so at the moment, I bust out laughing in myself not because the scene itself is funny, but because you captured that moment so well. Like, you captured how this type of dude talks in that type of moment—because you lived the life, of course.

So my question kind of is, how are people responding to these moments—these more controversial moments?

ER: I think the way that you did. I think it's natural for people to laugh with stuff that's...you know, funny but not funny. Or, "Did she say that?" You know, it's that kind of thing. So laughter is [*pause*] very complicated.

SD: Mhmm.

ER: So far, people who have come up to me and talk to me about the performance, so far they just tell me how it touched them, or you know like they were glad there were some funny parts, or you know "Oh my God you made me cry." Or you know, stuff like that. But nobody so far has said, "You embarrassed me. You disgusted me. And why did you do that? And I'm not feeling you."

SD: Right.

ER: So thank God, I've not—

SD: Because it's *real*.

ER: —gotten that.

- SD: You're giving us realness, though. That's why it's hard to complain or have any type of critique like that cause it's like, "No, this is life." Like, at least for those of us who *know*.
- ER: Thank you.
- SD: Another kind of monologue that you did was of the bottom bitch of—
- ER: Andrew.
- SD: —when you put the wig on him.
- ER: Andrew. Mhmm.
- SD: I wanted to disagree with what she was saying, but I understood every...like, [*snaps with each word*] the rules of the game.
- ER: Uh-huh.
- SD: And it had such a profound effect on me.
- ER: Uh-huh. And she was giving me a education.
- SD: Yes!
- ER: That's another form of education. This is how you work the streets—at least the type of, you know, "how we gon work it."
- SD: Right.
- ER: So she coulda not told me anything because basically she was my *rival*.
- SD: Mhmm.
- ER: Even though...you know what I mean? She coulda just let me go on out there and not know how to, you know, do some things [*laughs*]. You know?
- SD: That's right.
- ER: But she told me how she worked. This is how she worked, so—
- SD: And it's how she worked in a specific context.
- ER: Right, in that context.
- SD: Cause that's where it gets all rhetoric-y.

ER: Yes, yes.

SD: It's like, these are the rules for this particular game.

ER: Right, right, right, right. That's it.

SD: And that subjectivity thing especially in this book is such a key part because I remember something that stuck out with me and Blair was one of the things that you said, "We were going on a date like normal people."

ER: Yes. Yesss.

SD: That stabbed me and Blair in our hearts *right* then.

ER: It can make me cry, too. [*voice wavering*] It can make my cry because [*pause*] I never felt like a normal person.

SD: I can relate.

ER: You know what I mean?

SD: Mhmm.

ER: And people say things around you all the time that make you feel like you're not normal, and so even though people probably look at that, "Well how can you say that you loved a pimp?" Or, "How could you even think that a pimp loved *you*?"

Like I said, people put you in a box and label you, and nobody really is normal. How do we know what that is? What does that mean? We're all human beings. What does that mean that we're not normal, you know what I mean? We all feel love, pain, hate. We feel all the things that human beings can feel—jealousy, everything! When you consume that abnormality from the people around you, you believe it. It's complicated. [*laughs*]

SD: I can relate. As a black queer person, you know...that normal thing, like—

ER: Yeah.

SD: The reason that cut us is because, again, dating and all that type of stuff—

ER: Yes, yes.

SD: —that's reserved for normal, straight people.

ER: Right, right.

SD: And so we're like, "Ugh...She hit it, she hit it." Because it's like, oftentimes we're surprised if we go out on a date or like get married to somebody that...you're not supposed to be granted these normal things.

ER: Right, right. That's right. That's right, that's right.

SD: Mmm.

ER: And even though I was in an abusive situation and agreeing with it, you know what I mean? Cause people look at it when you are a street hooker like I was, and you're with pimps, there's no, um...like you don't need therapy. You know what I mean? Like you wanna be out there, you love to be with pimps, you love jumping out of cars, you love niggas putting knives up to your throat every night. *[laughs]* This is what you chose! People use that language of choice.

SD: Yes!

ER: You know what I mean? But this, that was my life! And it was a life where I was vulnerable *[pause]* and it's a life that allows people to write you off, and that's why I wanted to bring up the part about, you know, when you're a black or poor person, from an un-preferred group, you're not human trafficked: you just a ho.

SD: Mhmm.

ER: You know, so again, when people put a label on what it is, it's like, it's a license for people to write you off and if you get killed, or whatever your pain is, nobody has to care about it because you chose it.

SD: Mhmm. That's right.

ER: You *chose* that life.

SD: Mmm. *[pause]* One thing that I find so interesting, specifically as a graduate student here is: one, we're studying all this research where again a majority of the people are old white people, whatever, but naturally I'm seeing connections all throughout my life life—like, not just life for the past couple of years, but life since I was a little kid. And so, one of the reasons I'm going there is because—one thing, people always talk about Jay-Z using his hustle skills of being a crack dealer to transition to this or to transition to be a mogul. I'm wondering how much of your skills, like how much of that informed your work now? Like—

ER: Being on the streets?

SD: Yeah, like I'm sure it did.

ER: I understand what it means to work hard from a lot of different perspectives. My mother was an immigrant, you know, you grindin, you grindin, you grindin. You know, just from being poor and in the hood you gotta *survive*, so I understand grindin. So when I got to graduate school—or school period—when I got to Cleveland State, when I came back and I was like, “I’m not gonna let anybody turn me around. I’m gonna do this” cause I really had nothing else to do at that point.

SD: Right.

ER: I knew that I had to work hard, just like how I worked the streets. I knew that I had to work hard. I knew that I had to do what I had to do to survive up in here. And Geneva Smitherman told me, “Don’t lose your street knowledge; you need that.” I understand that. I really could apply that. I could apply that. But also, I guess the rhetorical aspects of it, too, cause when you’re out on the streets you’re playing different roles all the time. *[laughs]*

SD: Rhetorical agility. *[snaps]*

ER: *[laughs]* Come on now.

SD: All right.

ER: Go ahead, go ahead, nephew. That’s what it was.

SD: It’s all connected!

ER: It’s real. It’s real. It is.

SD: It’s all connected.

ER: It is. And you’re so right about these arbitrary divisions that we make. It’s these discourses. That’s what it is. These discourses, and we’re not understanding that they’re very hybrid, you know, and that things that apply in one apply in another just in a different context.

SD: Cause they’re all informed by ideology.

ER: Yes. Yes.

SD: You know? Cause it’s like, with me personally, I’m doing—remember at the conference I said I was trying to do work with shade or throwing shade?

ER: Oh, I remember that, yeah.

SD: And so, it's actually expanded, and like it's gone from me just explaining what shade is in the academic context to me using shade to talk about language policy and all that type of stuff.

ER: Mmm.

SD: But one thing that I find interesting is just even the fact of how to approach academia—how you have to explain this perspective. As soon as I mention shade, I have to go into the whole lifestyle, the whole subjectivity that informs these rhetorics.

ER: Shade, mhmm. Right.

SD: You know?

ER: Yeah.

SD: And so, that's something from last night stuck out. When you were writing in grad school, that's your language, these are your experiences, so you have to—

ER: Right, that's right.

SD: Mmm.

ER: That's right.

SD: Lemme see what else I've... Ooh, here's a question: I asked about people's response. How has the field responded? Composition and rhetoric or academia?

ER: Well, the people who have taken time to give me some feedback have been very receptive. You know, I don't know how to read a lot of blank faces. *[laughs]*

SD: Right.

ER: You know, I do know how to read some of em, but they're the ones who don't really give me any feedback except the blank faces. But the people who have, I mean, I've gotten some really good feedback from Valerie Lee. She's the Chief Diversity Officer at OSU. She is a African American Literature professor by training—

SD: Ahh.

ER: —even though now she's in administration, she's a African American Literature professor, so she was giving me...you know, like, analyses that *only* somebody trained—

SD: Mhmm.

ER: —you know, in that way, could give me. Cause you know, I'm rhetoric and linguistics. I'm not literature per se.

SD: Right. Right.

ER: She gave me some great stuff. And then, just you know, people like Dr. Tamika [Carey]—

SD: Mhmm.

ER: —Gwen [Pough]. People who've been teaching the book in their class, they give me different things. So Gwen was telling me, like what they talk about in her class from a Black feminist perspective of, you know, like, so... Why was it that I was vulnerable to pimps? Besides the trauma, you know, I'm sure the trauma was there, too—

SD: Gotta talk about that

ER: But why in school? What is it about, you know, like, school wasn't holding her attention? [laughs] There are a lot of smart little Black girls sitting in classrooms that are bored. So they're talking about stuff from, you know, a Black feminist perspective and looking at my book from, like an on the ground perspective. What can we learn from this book to help our scholarship more, you know, have a reach in the community in the lives of people, rather than it just being some academic, theoretical this, that, and the other about empowerment of Black women and girls.

ER: So, um—

SD: We need to talk about that.

ER: Yes.

SD: Let's go ahead and talk about that. Because I told you, like, similarities between Memphis and Cleveland. Syracuse got the same stuff—former industrial town.

ER: Mhmm.

SD: And so like at the barbershop, I'm just getting my hair cut. You would think this was out of a damn movie.

ER: [laughs]

SD: So I'm just getting my hair cut, gettin my look right, and so this thirteen-year-old boy walks in. It's about 1:00 in the middle of a weekday. And Sun, this is my barber, she's like, "You can't be here during school hours. What the hell? You know the rules up in here." That's something within itself the fact that there are rules. Good. [laughter] But

he's like, "I'm suspended." And so naturally, I'm thinking Trayvon Martin as soon as he starts speaking about school. I'm like, "Damn, it's real. It's real. It's real." [laughs]

So then I asked him to tell us the story of how he got suspended. He tells this long story about chasing this boy around the cafeteria throwin stuff, like some animated stuff. And I was like, "How bout this? Would you mind writing that down for me?" And he was like, "Okay." And I'm gettin my hair cut, and he stopped to write three paragraphs about what happened.

ER: Mmm.

SD: I'm shocked to shit that this boy did this.

ER: Mhmm, mhmm.

SD: Like I can't even put it together. But so as the conversation goes on, I'm talking to him. [pause] It...[sighs]...it just broke my heart so bad. It's that lack of opportunity, so then lack of imagination. He actually said, "I don't care about anything." Now when he said that, I could relate, cause at 12 I only cared about so much anyway.

ER: Okay, right.

SD: And then like talking about future [he] said, "Probably going to prison," and being dead serious, though. Dead serious. And so that's why I wanted to bring it back to you and the girls—or young Black girls not having opportunities or not having the right exposure, so it limits—

ER: —what you can see for yourself. Yeah, if you can't see anything for yourself, all you seein around you is what you see. And then the media doesn't make it any better at all. I really feel like a lot of us are disconnected from education. We might go there every day. We might not get in trouble. We might get good grades, but we're still *disconnected* because it's not relevant to your life. [hits hand on table] They don't make it relevant to your life. And that's why I like *literacies* and critical literacy education because you can't separate reading from poverty, from capitalism, from other forms of exploitation. You can't separate reading from that.

SD: The material.

ER: Yes, so you know what passes for education in a lot of classrooms is just like so disconnected from my everyday life cause when I walk out of here, I gotta walk past a whole bunch of shit to go home. You know? And then when I get home, what I'm seein in my house is so different from what I'm seein on television, and I can't make—what's the connection? I know I don't have any money, and they keep tellin me that if I just could read, my house wouldn't be like this. You know but the connections, they're not...it's not bein...you know.

SD: And people not critically engaging with why the hell you can't read in the first place, you know?

ER: Right. It's not because I'm not able to.

SD: Right. Especially when I'm reading [*snaps*] in so many different ways outside of that—

ER: Thank you. Thank you. This little narrow way for your test.

Cue music "Lost Tape" by Loopez.

SD: Ooh, I was going to ask you actually about genre. So, well, the memoir—I'm pretty sure you picked the memoir because you had a story, but why a one-woman show? That's very intriguing to me.

ER: I think performance helps you to know in a way that you *know*. It's like expressing that embodied knowledge in another way that can reach somebody. You know what I mean? Cause sometimes on the page, you know, it's one thing but that performance piece, it's not only gon reach someone else, but it's also reaching me again. You know what I mean? It's reaching me again, and it's reaching people in different ways—people who might not have been a po ho on dope, but you know like how different parts you said jumped out at you.

SD: Mhmm.

ER: I knew that a lot of people need to hear the *patois*. They need to hear the language of E 68th and Cedar in Cleveland. They need to hear—

SD: Yes.

ER: And also to humanize that these were real people I'm talkin about. These are real people's lives. And so I think there's just somethin in performance that you can't get from the page.

SD: Mhmm. I love that you're stressing that they're real people cause I have this kind of theory in my mind that whenever you telling real stories inherent in there there's a critique cause it's like as soon as we understand your story or even—was it AC who was born rich, but—?

ER: Grew up in a good neighborhood.

SD: Yeah, well not rich but grew up in a good neighborhood. As soon as you start to examine these dynamics, it's hard to not critique the larger system that makes it so that these things are happening.

ER: Yes. Yes. Yes.

- SD: I love the idea of a one-woman show. I'm actually kind of struggling with genre. Everything is a combination of different identities—
- ER: Yes, yes. Yeah.
- SD: —layering and stuff. So it's hard not to bring in my love for pop culture, my love for performance, and all these things to the classroom or to my scholarship.
- ER: Right, and that's what I was trying to say. I still don't know if I answered that brother's question well last night. It's that we've been taught to section ourselves off, and that's what's happening to kids in classrooms, too, is that you're not engaging my person. You're not engaging my person. You're trying to isolate this kind of knowledge from this kind of knowledge, and they inform each other. And I've just been figuring out on this journey how to put my whole self together, and that's what it is—
- SD: That's radical.
- ER: with your performance. It's putting your whole self together.
- SD: Now, I have a question. This is probably about the larger system and all this other type of stuff. I remember in Tony Scott's book, *Dangerous Writing*, one of his critiques is that well, we're trying to do all this progressive liberal stuff, but also the classroom exists within a larger institution—
- ER: Right.
- SD: —that inhibits the work that we're trying to do.
- ER: Isn't that something.
- SD: And I definitely think about it like this. How am I going to tell a student that their home language has beauty and power and all this when the rest of the world is saying it doesn't?
- ER: [*laughs*] But I still think you gotta tell the truth. It *can* be accepted. Are you willing to learn about yourself? You know what I mean? Cause some people feel like they don't have to know about themselves because it's discredited knowledge.
- SD: Mhmm. That's true.
- ER: But are you willing to learn about yourself? Are you willing to embrace yourself? Embrace your history? Embrace...and it doesn't mean that all, you know people always go there, well *all* black people don't speak Ebonics...
- SD: Right.

- ER: Okay, well whatever it is that you *do* speak, are you willing to embrace it? Are you willing to embrace your ancestors? You know what I mean?
- SD: Now how do you think I should approach use of non-academic English and academic discourses?
- ER: You have to be critical about any language that you're using, so as long as they show me some criticality, I'm with it. And we gonna always... Criticality is gonna be central to everything we do cause you gotta know what you're doing. You gotta know who your audience is. It's not that you can't use hip-hop discourse up in here because we're in Syracuse University. You *can* use hip-hop discourse.
- SD: Mhmm.
- ER: I want you to use it *rhetorically*. You know, I need you to become persuasive with your writing so that when people read it, they don't care what all kind of languages you put up in here cause you got me open.
- SD: Right.
- ER: You gotta get me open with your writing. That's what it is to learn how to write, and we shut people down because we want this—that academic narrow stuff, you know what I mean? We want that academic narrow thing that can just get you pass...it'll pass you, but it's not really nothing people can sink their teeth into.
- SD: Right.
- ER: There some folk who can write, though. I love reading a lot of...like the crunk feminists—
- SD: Mhmm, yes.
- ER: And you know, people who can write. Kevin [Browne] can write! You now, I don't consider myself as a creative writer even though...but some people I can just read anything they write. They can write, "Mary had a little lamb," but they write it in their way—
- SD: Exactly.
- ER: And they can be writing about, you know, a lot of complex issues, but they write it in their way and it reaches the heart. Like they say in the Baptist church, if it comes from the heart, it'll reach. [*laughs*]
- SD: That's what I love about African American vernacular language and all that because I find myself doing that when I'm teaching, too.

ER: I do, too.

SD: Cause that call and response—I never noticed it until I got here, even though I know what call and response is, that I will stand in front of class and wait for them to give me something back.

ER: Give me something!

SD: Something.

ER: Gimme. Don't leave me up here by myself.

SD: Not to mention, I feel part of it is vanity thinking I'm in front of an audience.

ER: *[laughs]* *[claps]*

SD: So y'all gon clap or jump up and down or something, you know. Somebody better do something. *[laughter]*

Now, let me look at this just to make sure I asked stuff, because we really naturally went through just about everything that I had to ask about.

ER: Oh, awesome.

SD: Yeah cause my last question was gonna be what's your approach to teaching, um, like multiple langua...or dealing with multiple literacies in the composition classroom?

ER: I think we need em. I mean not try to shut em down, you know. I'm teaching a class this semester that has some visiting Indonesian scholars in it, and it's such a blessing because it's a linguistics for literacy class. And so what they teach about linguistics for literacy coming from another country and talking about English in that context and how they learn English and you know just the complications around how people think they're teaching ESL over here, it gives the American white teachers in my classroom a whole nother perspective—

SD: Mmm.

ER: —to think about. So it's so good to have diversity and that diversity be in a position of authority because when those Indonesian scholars are teaching from their perspective, it empowers *their* knowledge, and it lets the teachers to see from another perspective how inadequate their training is.

SD: Yes!

ER: You know what I mean? So when we talk about diversity, a lot of times we just talking bout having people in the room. Diversity is like *empowering* that other knowledge that's in the room. Put that knowledge in a position of authority so you can see how the world works from another perspective. And how you just don't even understand. You think you know so much but you really have so much more to learn.

SD: That's also why having like women minorities and oppressed people as professors is so radical cause you have to... cause I think about just even me being a black male professor, and then I'm also out with my students.

ER: Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh. Be real.

SD: Because I feel like I have to be. It's part of critical consciousness.

ER: That's right. That's right. That's right.

SD: It's part of all of this type of stuff. So if we gonna talk about blackness, I gotta queer it.

ER: Okay!

SD: So just me being in the place complicates all those things.

ER: Mhmm.

SD: So then I was talking to one of my international students, and he was nervous about his writing, and I was like, "You know, I'm used to dealing with English as a second language students. It's nothing." And he was like, "English is my fourth language."

ER: [*laughs*]

SD: And so ever since then—

ER: Okay? Yesss.

SD: That rocked my damn world.

ER: Four.

SD: One where I assumed he only knew two.

ER: You know, they multi. *Multi*.

SD: And to me, patriarchy is the only excuse cause it's not even logical for us to be this far behind *everyone* else.

- ER: I know, I know, I know. And we are *behind* in so many ways and think we know everything.
- SD: [*whispers*] And don't know nothing.
- ER: And don't know nothing. And don't wanna know.
- SD: Don't wanna know. Don't wanna know. Cause a perfect example of that, the um Zimmerman trial. Kevin wrote a piece about it.
- ER: Mhmm. I read it.
- SD: I'm just watching Don West talk to Rachel Jeantel and saying he doesn't know, and it's like, you know what she is saying but you just trying to get her angry so you can discredit her as a witness.
- ER: Oh yeahhhh.
- SD: You know [*hits hand on table*] good and damn well.
- ER: Race is working so, you know, in so many ways in that trial. It's... it is something else how the race card was played on so many levels.
- SD: *So* many levels.
- ER: So many levels in that, you know.
- SD: Sooo many levels.
- ER: It was just... it was just terrible. How you all gon kill the people's son and say he caused his own death? He *caused* his own death from walking down the street minding his own business.
- SD: In his father's neighborhood.
- ER: In his father's neighborhood after the police told *you* not to get out your car, and they let that jury get off with sayin that *he* was the aggressor.
- SD: Systemic.
- ER: [*hits hand on table*] And the man is following me now!
- SD: It was saying so much. But one of the things I kept asking myself, say in June, July, August, was "How am I supposed to have any little bit of self-esteem when I know that my body has no worth in this paradigm?"

- ER: I know. It doesn't.
- SD: None of it makes sense other than patriarchy, racism, institutionalized.
- ER: It doesn't make sense. Cause look at your hair, look at my hair. Something is wrong with us.
- SD: Right.
- ER: Something is wrong with us.
- SD: Chile...
- ER: And even if we straightened it or cut it all off, we still got this. So how you going to get rid of yourself to fit in? You know, I don't want to!
- SD: Pulling up those pants are not going to keep you from being oppressed.
- ER: See what I'm saying?
- SD: And you know we see the same thing with folks policing women's dress and all that type of stuff, too, so—
- ER: Mhmm.
- SD: It's just too much.
- ER: It's too much. It's too much my nephew.
- SD: It's too much going on! [*hits hand on table*] It's too much going on right now! So that's why it's hard to be, say like, a Black intellectual cause you critically thinking through all this stuff—it's too much!
- ER: Oh, it's too much. It's too much my nephew.
- SD: I'm feeling all oppressed—
- ER: Oh my God!
- SD: —and repressed and depressed and obsessed [*laughs*].
- ER: I'm telling you, I was going to bed early every night during the Trayvon Martin trial because it got to a point where I couldn't watch it anymore. My stomach was hurting.
- SD: Mhmm.

- ER: And my stomach is still hurting about so many other things. I just saw a documentary, a slice of a documentary the other day about the infant mortality rate in Cleveland, Ohio, which *rivals* any third world country.
- SD: Damn!
- ER: And they talked about how the Black women in Ohio have the *highest* infant mortality rate, *higher* than *some* third world countries. Can you believe it?
- SD: Yes.
- ER: People are poor. They got these stereotypes about people playing the system and just keep having babies and this and that. These are people who are not playing. They were showing people who worked seven days a week, people who were going to school and worked and had kids, and they just didn't have even time to rest so they were having their babies prematurely, having a two pound baby. And then your baby dies. You know, just people with no support—people with no support who are working hard. You know what I mean?
- SD: Mhmm.
- ER: And some who maybe were not working, but they were *trying* to take care of their children.
- SD: Which is a full-time job.
- ER: And they would go for food stamps and they would tell them, “Oh, well your stamps will start in seven weeks”—well I don't have anything to eat *right now*.
- SD: Thank you. We're talking about a baby.
- ER: So it's seven more weeks and I'm not getting proper nutrition, I don't have any money, I might be staying from here to here to here, and then you wonder why my baby dies.
- SD: Or, you wonder why my baby dies, or you wonder why I'm stealing pampers from Wal-Mart and food and stuff.
- ER: See what I'm saying. See what I'm saying.
- SD: It's set up.
- ER: So that made me...that just...you know it was like it's so much. It's just so much, and that's why I feel like our scholarship has to really—you gotta bring it as much as you can in people's face because it's just like another movie. People just turn the channel. And there's people dying every day, and they don't have to be dying. [*pause*]

SD: Chile...

ER: But we got to end on a happy note. Are we still taping? Okay, we got to end on hopefully, with hope, with uplift. We can't end on the infant mortality rate in Cleveland.

SD: No, that's not very...

ER: We can't end on the worthlessness of a Black body or a queer body.

SD: Cause my body, well my queer body has plenty of worth. Just ask.

ER: [*Singing*] "My body all over..."

SD + ER: your body." [*laughing*] [*clapping*]

SD: Trust. I'm not listening to what the man says. I know that my body got value. [*laughs*]

But, so okay. So one thing I've been saying to people—random friends of mine—the last thing I say is like, "Keep hope alive. You are somebody." And when I first started saying it, I was saying it as joke, just riffing off Jessie Jackson and stuff, but then I realized how radical that statement was, especially back *then*, so especially *now*. How radical it is to look at someone and say, "You are somebody" in spite of all this bullshit.

ER: Okay...I love my brother RuPaul.

SD: Yes!

ER: RuPaul said, "If you don't love..."

SD+ER: yourself, how in the hell [*snap*] you gon love somebody else?"

SD: Can I get an amen up in here? [*Lots of laughter and clapping*] You know this! No, RuPaul is the consummate rhetorician. [*Snaps each word*] Rhetorically agile as shit.

ER: Oh, RuPaul...oh my God.

SD: Trust. And an icon and a brand who is not—like, is a Black history staple but nobody references it.

ER: Ohh, that's some work that needs to be done.

SD: Let's talk! Chile, you know I'm going to get in *that*...

ER: Come on know, do it! Teach!

SD: Teach!

ER+SD: Read! [*Laughter and clapping*]

SD: But yeah, RuPaul. Do you watch the *RuPaul's Drag Race*?

ER: Uh-huh.

SD: There are so many interesting gender and race dynamics going on up in through there.

ER: Uh-huh. I know.

SD: Dope, dope, dope.

ER: Very dope.

SD: Especially when we talk about, say, their conversations between like camp drag and like glamour drag. It's the same kind of dichotomies, you know, everywhere.

ER: Everywhere, you can't get out of it. [*laughs*]

SD: I'm so glad you like RuPaul.

ER: Oh yeah.

SD: See now, that's what's going to make me end up doing something on him because again that rhetorical agility. That's why I like Black people and minorities in general and queer people. You *have* to take on these different personas for survival. So it's like, when I'm walking into a composition classroom or rhetoric classroom, and you're telling me what these people have said about it, "Oh you've got to be aware of audience analysis" and all that. Please. I've been throwing shade since I was five. [*laughter*] I'm always aware of audience. Y'all ain't telling me nothing new!

ER: Okay!

SD: But I need to learn *your* language so that I can make the whole thing discernible. You know.

ER: Isn't that something. And that's what I fought with writing this book because I would do a draft, and I would let somebody read it. And some people said they couldn't understand the Ebonics or they couldn't understand how I was...you know like, "Uh, I liked it, but I didn't know if I knew..." You know, and these would be people who spoke Ebonics!

It's a battle with writing. You know like, at some point you gotta take a stand and say, "I'm going with this. I'm going with this because, you know, this is what I'm trying to put out there."

Cue music “ZootSuit” by Tab & Anitek

SD: I would like to give a special shoutout to Dr. E for taking time to sit down and talk with me, and I’d like to thank you all for listening. This has been Seth E. Davis for This Rhetorical Life.

BK: *This Rhetorical Life* is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of *This Rhetorical Life* are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt, with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.