



Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics

Louis Maraj. Utah State University Press, 2020. 208 pages. \$25.95 paperback.

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BOOK REVIEWS



Louis Maraj. **Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics**. Utah State University Press, 2020. 208 pages. \$25.95 paperback.

In *Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics*, which received the 2022 CCCC Outstanding Book Award, Louis Maraj skillfully encourages interdisciplinary and broad thinking about Blackness and racialized structures of power in institutions, particularly educational spaces. Maraj seeks to make visible and encourage self-reflexivity about systems of thought and power that create oppressive binaries and prevent students from seeing how these systems provide access to those with privilege and deny access to the oppressed. *Black or Right* addresses how racist and oppressive rhetorics are ingrained and entrenched in our institutions and argues that instructors should be responsible for assessing their daily practices, what those practices look like, and how those practices perpetuate oppressive systems while simultaneously teaching students to do the same.

All the more applicable after the death of George Floyd; the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. capitol building; and recent increases in hate crimes, *Black or Right* provides insight into racial realism that calls readers to action. According to Maraj, the way to destabilize the academy is to cease making students into objects of study, let them bring their knowledge to the classroom, and help them see what *they* want from the university “through transforming action” (Freire quoted in Maraj 49). Specifically, Maraj problematizes the way institutions make space for students of color, particularly in the composition classroom. Building on the work of prominent Black feminist theorists and current scholars in social justice and antiracist rhetorics, Maraj encourages a fluid understanding of Blackness and our own roles in academia, which contribute to knowledge that we gather, reflect upon, and share in our writing and research to dissolve borders between communities and universities. He advocates for breaking down the borders between institutions like academia and community through ethnographies that engage in cultural critique. Institutional struggles for power are embedded within the academy’s borders, and Maraj’s book shows how resistance to traditional ways of constructing meaning in education embraces Blackness.

Maraj advocates for an overall negotiation of Blackness through what he calls “rhetorical reclamations,” which demonstrate “how rhetorics of Blackness ... offer potentials for resistant Black antiracist agency in historically white spaces to counter white institutional defensiveness” (20). The rhetorical reclamations Maraj advocates for—Black autoethnography, hashtagging, inter(con)textual reading, and reconceptualized Black disruption—become the focus of chapters one through four of the book. These reclamations, Maraj explains, allow “a multiplicity of possibilities” to arise, providing meaning for the definition of Blackness and disrupting the historical antiBlack nature of academia (138, 144).

In the introduction to *Black or Right*, Maraj employs ontological plasticity along with Black feminist theory to explicate his method(ology), forms of intervention, the scope and objectives of anti/racist campus rhetorics, and guiding questions. Ontological plasticity is integral and relevant in the sense that Maraj holds a para/ontological orientation that concerns itself with redefined Blackness (6). Countering white defensiveness within academic institutions, Maraj explores the complexities of unsettling the discipline of rhetoric and composition—and the white supremacist rhetoric produced in our writing, research, and pedagogy—through the integration of Black mediations that consider social contexts surrounding racial rhetoric.

Chapter one delves into Black feminist approaches to ethnography in which Maraj details ways of mobilizing his identity as a graduate student and instructor in the composition

classroom through interactions with students as he instructs them, learns from and with them, and more broadly exists as a Black body in academia. Mobilization implies the invocation of Black autoethnography, as it presents a means of disrupting narratives of historically white institutions. Maraj invokes rhetorical reclamations in an attempt to take back the narrative of Blackness in academia from institutional white supremacist rhetoric constructed by non-Black persons to discriminate and oppress Black folks and their rhetorical embodiments. For example, Maraj shares reflective narratives about his experience as a Black rhetorician by discussing the study of Black diasporic identities with Black autoethnography that counters heterogeneity, tokenism, and being seen as suspect on campuses. He also details off-campus interactions, such as his own experience with racial profiling and police brutality.

In chapter two, Maraj delves into the practicality of hashtag composition as a form of resistance against the neoliberal classroom. In discussing and arguing for hashtagging literacy, Maraj explains that “given the tool’s culture/history, it reveals accessible avenues for antiracist energy and agency, particularly when contextualized in movements seeking public justice for Black folk, people of color, and other marginalized groups” (74). In this chapter, Black annotation and hashtag compositions are means of digitally navigating and mobilizing rhetorical reclamations that illustrate the material effect of Black suffering.

Chapter three discusses the definition of Blackness in the United States following cultural movements post-Ferguson and in relation to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. For Maraj, inter(con)textual reading can destabilize commonly held biases that define object-beingness (101). The dissolution of institutional power via rhetorical means and inter(con)textual meaning-making uncovers how institutions dictate the ways life is best lived and negotiated and how historiographical artifacts become history for scholars and future generations.

Maraj discusses the circulation of and complicity with white supremacist rhetoric, media, and materials around college campuses in chapter four. This chapter argues for the dismantling of institutional white supremacy even though it is intertwined and entrenched in the things instructors and students do. Furthermore, Maraj offers a reflection on identity, positionality, and whether individuals and institutions think critically about their publicized personas.

In the conclusion of *Black or Right*, Maraj encourages rhetorical reclamations as a means of eliminating rhetorical silences and the objectification of Black bodies/beings and their rhetoric. Through continued self-awareness and reflection on our knowledge and meaning-making, we can confront and combat antiBlackness and the alteration and distortion of history.

Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics is valuable in that it argues for self-reflection about the roles of everyone (even people of color) in white supremacist institutions and encourages continual assessment as a means of resisting racism, racial capitalism, and settler-colonialism. This work urges those who are part of the institution of academia to assess their daily practices by asking how we record history, tell stories of ourselves and our students, and teach in the midst of continuing systemic racism in the post-Ferguson era.

As Maraj advocates, it is more imperative than ever to disrupt “given ideas about the academic monograph, space, place, objects, subjects, meanings, semantics in order to read/write Blackness with/in its varied terms” as opposed to prevalent you/them and us/them narratives (xiii). Oppressive thought systems culminate through everyday actions and thoughts and represent how individuals move through community and institutional spaces. Maraj argues for thinking critically and deeply about what we do in our everyday lives and how we move through spaces with borders and barriers erected to exclude outside perspectives. Assessing rhetoric and its continual entrenchment in racial capitalism and settler-colonialism, Maraj

urges us to think about what our daily practices look like and how we perpetuate oppressive systems in these daily practices.

All in all, those involved in education are encouraged to read *Black or Right* for its emphasis on white institutional educational spaces and the potential of rhetorical reclamations and new ways of meaning-making. Future scholarship in antiracist rhetoric and pedagogy might build upon this work by employing Maraj's open-source course materials to enhance antiracist practices and by encouraging further research on rhetorical reclamations of Black diasporic thought.

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BOOK REVIEWS



Allison L. Rowland. **Zoetropes and the Politics of Humanhood.** Ohio State University Press, 2020. 190 pages. \$29.95 paperback.

In *Zoetropes and the Politics of Humanhood*, Allison L. Rowland dusts off catacomesis and somatopeia from ancient rhetoric textbooks to explore the intersection of necropolitics and rhetorical theory. As a part of The Ohio State University's New Directions in Rhetoric and Materiality series, Rowland's book engages the Great Chain of Being alongside biopolitics to understand the material-discursive practices that result in humanhood. *Zoetropes and the Politics of Humanhood* builds upon the foundations of Giorgio Agamben, using both his theoretical work on biopolitics and his use of the prefix *zoe-* in *Homo Sacer*, and Jenell Johnson, using her work differentiating personhood from humanhood. Building upon these underpinnings, Rowland crafts zoetropes and zoerhetorics, defining the former—a subset of the latter—as rhetorical strategies that transvalue the status of a group of existents. In doing so, Rowland examines how populations are parsed into “worthy lives, subhuman lives, and lives sentenced to death” (16). At its core, Rowland's book focuses on how daily rhetoric upholds empire and determines whose life holds value politically and in the American hierarchy. Rowland also develops a schema to understand contemporary American transvaluations of life. Arguing that all hierarchies are rhetorical, Rowland builds a compelling framework that includes theories of race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability for a book that unites interests in health, citizenship, and social justice.

Zoetropes and the Politics of Humanhood does a masterful job of weaving together health rhetorics, citizenship, race, gender, and sexuality. Rowland's endeavor is theoretical, but it strikes a powerful balance in proposing a framework to understand the zoerhetorics that modulate the status and value of people's lives and working with the materiality of the existents it discusses. While the overall density of rhetorical theory may scare off interdisciplinary scholars, Rowland acknowledges this difficulty by dedicating both the introduction and chapter one to parsing her terms before working through three individual case studies in the