

## **Interview with Professor Handley**

Nateya Taylor, Urban Studies Program, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

**This interview with Dr. Derek Handley, Assistant Professor in the English department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), was conducted on April 20, 2022, by Nateya Taylor, MS Student, Urban Studies Programs, UWM. Dr. Handley joined UWM in 2019 and is a recent addition to the urban studies faculty. During the interview we discussed his journey to academia and the important role rhetoric plays in Black history, Black culture, and Black social movements.**



*Nateya Taylor:* I thought your work was very interesting since I've never seen anyone intersect English and Urban Studies. So, what inspired you to take on English as your discipline?

*Professor Handley:* That began my freshman year of college as an undergraduate. I went to Hampton University which is a historically Black college. I always enjoyed reading and to a certain degree writing. I was also in the Navy ROTC, so I had a job waiting for me when I graduated college. It was easy to choose something that I actually liked to do, knowing that I had something waiting for me. Being an English major at an HBCU was a wonderful experience because I was immersed in this world of African American literature, so that very much appealed to me. The English discipline has appealed to me all along.

*Nateya Taylor:* When you decided to go into graduate school for English, was your plan to go into academia?

*Professor Handley:* Yes. I originally earned a master's degree in creative writing. When I left the Navy the first time after 10 years, I went back home to Pittsburgh, and I pursued an MFA degree in creative writing because I was going to write the great American novel like everyone else. But also, I went into graduate school with the hope of getting a job teaching at a community college. That was my goal. I had the privilege of doing some adjunct work while I was still on active duty in the Navy, and I felt like this was what I was supposed to do. I felt like I was called to teach.

*Nateya Taylor:* What influenced you to go beyond that point once you realized you could do more than just teach at a community college?

**Professor Handley:** While I was getting a master's degree, I took this course called “Rhetorical Education.” This was at the University of Pittsburgh, and the professor's name was Jessica Enoch, who has since grown to be a very prominent person in the field. I wrote for her class a paper on this little-known Illinois state senator who was climbing up the ranks, and I’m like, this guy got potential. His name was Senator Barack Obama. I wrote this paper for this class thinking about how Obama was drawing from the traditions of African American rhetoric to appeal to a larger audience. So, in conversations with her, she planted the seed about my pursuing a PhD. The other thing that happened was the post-9/11 GI Bill was passed, so now I had money to pursue the PhD, and my job at the community college had limited tuition reimbursement as well.

**Nateya Taylor:** I think it is always important for someone to sow that seed so you can know there is greater than your expectations. I have definitely had that in my life too, so thank you for sharing that.

**Professor Handley:** She planted that seed and then when I was in the PhD program at Carnegie Mellon, I think I was in my second year, I hit a rough patch. I thought about dropping out, and there was Professor Joe Trotter, who is a prominent African American historian who is my friend and mentor, gave me a little pep talk that I needed at that moment. I am always thankful for him that I stayed with the program and kept at it. So, I gotta give Professor Trotter a shout out as well.

**Nateya Taylor:** Now shifting to your work in Urban Studies, how would you describe the relationship between Urban Studies and English?

**Professor Handley:** Some of the greatest writers’ works are set in urban settings. I think about James Baldwin and his short story “Sonny's Blues.” This urban life in New York City, the

narrator, his brother, is struggling with drug addiction and gets out of prison, so that is a depiction of urban life. A lot of my work like my book I am currently working on is looking at the rhetorical strategies African American communities used in response to urban renewal in the 50s and 60s: Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and Saint Paul Minnesota, the urban north. I taught a course where we read all of August Wilson's plays. Nine of ten of his plays are set in Pittsburgh, and the other one is set in Chicago. You see the depiction of Black life with the challenges, the demands, and the problems of the urban environment, how these Black people are dealing with these different things and their connection from the south a part of the great migration. For me it is obvious and natural to have to see that connection between English and urban studies.

*Nateya Taylor:* That made me think about African American vernacular English and how we have our own language in a way. I know your research focuses on rhetoric, Black people, and social justice, so what is your perspective on how our unique language makes the rhetoric of Black social justice movements unique?

*Professor Handley:* This is one of the things I am covering in my book. The people I study are drawing from Black rhetorical tradition and at least during the 50s and 60s what we saw was this merger between social change with leadership in the church. It is almost like in order to be viewed as a Black leader you must be able to give a gifted speech because that is something that we value: to be able to speak well. Drawing from that Black tradition, we were seeing a new group of leadership in the early 2000s that was not necessarily being drawn from the African American church. Previously Reverend Al Sharpton, Reverend Jesse Jackson, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, they are drawing from this Black rhetorical tradition that was placed in leadership positions by the African American community, arguing for change and arguing for social justice.

That rhetorical tradition is a style of speaking that is different from other communities. There were discriminatory laws that were directed specifically toward African Americans, so part of this rhetorical tradition during this time in American history is reminding people of the hypocrisy of the words that you have on paper. You are saying all people are created equal, but you are not treating African Americans equally. You have these racist housing covenants that say only white people can live in Whitefish Bay or Fox Point. There is something problematic about that. Being singled out in a lot of laws is naturally, I think, is going to bring marginalized people closer together to find different strategies in which to argue against these laws.

*Nateya Taylor:* You talked about how African American leaders arguing against certain laws, so how do you feel about the rhetoric of Black social justice movements? Do you think the type of rhetoric that specifically African Americans use such as “Black Lives Matter,” makes a movement more impactful?

*Professor Handley:* It creates a certain amount of unity. Not to say that everybody agrees with the same philosophies, but there is something unifying. It is unifying depending on the language people use. Back in the late 70s James Brown had a song “Say it loud I’m Black and I’m proud.” Stokely Carmichael in 1966 at a civil rights march coined the phrase “Black Power.” These are slogans, even symbols which unified. I write about rhetoric and place, how a particular place works with the arguments and Black people. Martin Luther King giving his “I Have a Dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial has a more powerful effect as opposed to him just giving that same speech in a parking lot. You see him speaking in front of a statue of Abraham Lincoln, and we all know what Abraham Lincoln represents. If we draw from the Aristotle definition of rhetoric - the best available means for persuasion, Black people get creative using places, using

words, using arguments, using symbols to be persuasive and unify. According to Maulana Karenga, African American rhetoric is a rhetoric of community, resistance, and possibility. But community is the first part. It is bringing folks together and that is what we have seen in the Black Lives Matter Movement.

*Nateya Taylor:* Now I would like to talk about the research on restrictive covenants that you are doing with Professor Anne Bonds. Could you tell us what the research is about?

*Professor Handley:* This was Professor Bond's project initially. I was hired at UWM in 2019, and I first met Anne Bonds because of an article she wrote which to me felt like a rhetorical article and she just did not know it. It was about the 53206 neighborhood, and I reached out to her to have coffee. It was then that she told me about this housing covenants project, and I was like, oh that sounds very interesting. She had been in communication with Mapping Prejudice out of Minnesota, and she wanted to do here in Milwaukee what Mapping Prejudice had done in Minneapolis. What they did was examine all the deeds in Minneapolis, identified racist language, and mapped where the racist housing covenants were. I remember thinking that this might be something I would like to work on at some point after getting settled at UWM and then I forgot about it. Then 2020 happened with the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and that whole summer of protests. I remember thinking to myself, "what is it that I can do in support of all this?" That is when I remembered her project, and I reached out to her. We met and we talked. I suggested to her, let us do something different than what everybody else is doing. Everybody is mapping racism, mapping prejudice, or mapping segregation, but that is just one half of the story. I said, this is not new to Black people. African Americans in Milwaukee knew in 1926 about housing covenants and if you look in Joe Trotter's book, he writes about a NAACP lawyer in Milwaukee

named George Brawley who identified racist covenants. Later Lloyd Barbee did the same as part of his fight to integrate Milwaukee schools. So, I said to Anne, we got to do both. We got to map the racism and map the Black resistance to racism. What we are talking about are stories: what are the stories of the Black people who were being denied buying houses in Shorewood, in Whitefish Bay, in Wauwatosa and elsewhere in Milwaukee County. Mapping Prejudice helps us process the deeds. We are talking about possibly hundreds of thousands of these racist covenant deeds. We are also doing archival research on African American resistance to housing segregation, and we made some new discoveries.

*Nateya Taylor:* My last question for you is, what advice do you have for prospective or new graduate students who might be considering taking an English path in urban studies?

*Professor Handley:* I would encourage an urban studies student to take classes in humanities because when we talk about urban studies we are still talking about people. Again, August Wilson does a wonderful job in his plays in showing how people deal with the pressures of the urban environment. Whether it is in my class in English or some other humanities class, it is another way to think about how to tell a story. I think you should open yourself to other disciplines, to other methodologies. I think taking a class in the English department or see what is being offered in African American studies. If more help is needed, then I would say contact me and we can figure that out together.