**Episode 5: Antonio Byrd**

**Wil Flores:** Hi there! Welcome to On the Job with the sweet land, digital rhetoric collaborative podcast!

**Nupoor Ranade:** Today, we your hosts, Nupoor Ranade and ...

**WF:** And myself, Wil Flores.

**NR:** Talk with Dr. Antonio Byrd about what insights he has for us for navigating the end of student life and transitioning to the job market and eventually a job.

**WF:** So here's Antonio, welcome to our podcast! Can you introduce your- yourself? You... Wait, let me do that--can you introduce me? [laughter] So here's Antonio!

**Antonio Byrd:** Hi, hello! Good to be here.

[light piano music plays]

**WF:** Okay, let me try this one more time. [clears throat] So here's Antonio, welcome to our podcast! Can you please introduce yourself to our audiences?

**AB:** Yeah, yeah, sure. yeah. So my name is Antonio Byrd, and I'm a new assistant professor of English at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and I teach courses in professional technical writing and digital rhetoric, multimodal composition, and, Black African American literacies. I graduated with my PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2019, just last year. I studied under professor Kate Vieira who really guided me through the entire process. So it's good to be here. I'm happy to talk about what it's been like so far in these past eight months.

**NR:** That's great, wonderful to have you here. We have a few questions that we're going to get started with. So here's the question: how has the transition been for you? The transition from a graduate student to a tenure-track faculty where you are actually teaching some graduate students?

**AB:** Mhm. Yeah, so the transition has been I think relatively smooth. I think part of it was, in dealing with, you know, a lot of the transitions from moving from one place to the next, from one university to the next, there's a lot of like emotional feelings and like mental work happening. Like when do I move? When do I sell things? What does my funding look like? over the summer? So one of the things that has been really helpful is having faculty members in my department who really reached out early on before the semester started to sit down with me and talk about my transition and the upcoming semester over drinks over lunch. I met with the department chair then, and I met with some of the other senior faculty, and we not only just talked about what it was like being in Kansas City and being in the English department.

So I will say then as far as like really focusing on teaching graduate courses or in my case, teaching a graduate course as a combination of undergraduates and graduate students at the same time, it's been a little bit nerve wracking, partly because it's not just MA and PhD students, but these are also teachers. Many of my graduate students, at least in the class that I'm teaching, they're also teachers. And so they're a little bit older than me. They come with life experience, teaching experience as well. And so there's a lot of questions in my mind when I was developing this course in Black African American literacy. How can I make sure that my topics, my content, is something that really speaks to them in their experiences that they really feel like that they can, have a playground where they can step into and have their, a lot of their ideas kind of validated at the same time. I did work with graduate students before at UW-Madison, but definitely not in the way of like being someone who teaches graduate students as well.

At UW-Madison, I was mainly, kind of there to support graduate students in their tutoring. As a writing consultant in the writing center and working with ways that they can improve their work, or in doing workshops on different types of writing for graduate students. But here, this is where the coursework really did matter and was working towards the research. I think one thing that really helped is that kind of like recognizing that they had knowledge already and that they can really bring that into the course. So that way they're really interested in the content and the material. And despite my own reservations, they have really like embraced a lot of the work, it seems, and I think it didn't really, really settle in that who I really was until someone called me Dr. Byrd. And, you know, someone says, one of the students said, "Well, thank you so much, Dr. Byrd. I'm really learning a lot." And I was just like, Oh, I'm a, I'm a doctor. I, Oh, that's right [laughter] I know things, I know things and two things. So, it's been a humbling experience for sure, but I definitely liked the horizontal mentorship, that I'm trying to go for.

**WF:** Right. I like that, that term that you just used that horizontal mentorship. Because I have a lot of experience as a writing consultant, working with other graduate students. Like even though my position is for, in the writing center here at MSU, is for just whoever really. I typically tend to work with a lot of graduate students and I always do get that sense of like, "Oh, this is like a seventh-year biomechanical engineer PhD. Like what do I have to bring to the table?" But by the end of it, I always hear something like, "Oh, that was really helpful. I didn't think about writing in this way." So can you talk to us a little bit about how maybe some of those experiences transferred over into the classroom in that way, especially for those out there who may not have that many, that much teaching experience, but have a lot of tutoring experience in this way. Could you talk to us a little bit about how those have, how that's helped.

**AB:** Yeah. Yeah. I think one of the things that you were saying about like of the tutoring experience, I do think a lot of those kinds of best practices that I learned, I bring into the classroom. So like for example, this idea of kind of like creating the space where it is the student who kind of like asks the questions or opposes their concerns or issues. And so like, for example, when I I'm assigned readings, there's no set, you know, specific set of questions. I give sort of like a preview of what the readings are about and what the theme may be. But then, in asking them some questions to put down in the discussion boards with their reading team, it's very kind of like, open-ended like, you know, what kind of issues or concerns do you see coming out of the readings that you can kind of like bring to the classroom. And then, from there, inside the classroom, creating a space where they can take those questions that they pose online. And really bring them into class discussion afterwards. And so there, I kind of like step into this role as a facilitator. I think, it's important that I still like offer some, some kind of grounding for how we can understand the readings, but ultimately it's like here's the space we can come in and have a conversation.

I do, I will say that, usually, I try to come up with little activities to engage them in discussion. So that way, everyone is really, connecting with each other in different kinds of ways. So I create the space for that to happen, and then from there kind of let them take things over and let the directions of the conversation go and what makes sense to them.

**WF:** Nice. Yeah, I think that's really helpful, especially for those of us who may not have had an opportunity to either like TA graduate course or like intern for a professor teaching a graduate course who just have this, like, I know personally I have like almost seven years of tutoring experience, but not a lot of teaching experience. So I think that's really helpful of seeing how those experiences will translate into teaching a graduate course, or at least a course with graduate students, particularly those graduate students who have so much experience coming, coming to the table. Just to kind of pivot a little bit. We also wanted to know, a little bit how you maintain your worklife balance. So we've heard a lot about like how life can be as a graduate student, and we experience it like we're living it, especially right now. We were just wondering what your experiences was like. we're like switching from graduate student to tenure-track faculty.

**AB:** Yeah. Yeah. I will say that to kind of preface this is, for me in my situation, I'm, like a, a single one-bedroom apartment professor at UMKC right now. So I don't have a, a partner or, all my family members are in good health and I don't have any children. Athough it would be nice to have a cat. I think, I think, having a cat would be a very nice addition to the household.

**WF:** You say that...

**NR:** Wil has a cat!

**WF:** But even as you say that,

**AB:** Oh no!

**WF:** My cat is trying to interrupt this meeting. [laughter]

**AB:** Oh okay, alright well maybe I'll, I'm still thinking about it still. But yeah, I will say that I, that I am being a single living in a one-bedroom apartment. in my first year, my worklife balance may look a little different compared to, other people who may have family members or partners or kids, people to look out for. But I will say that there's a lot of advantage and disadvantage to that because, I feel like a lot of that work as a graduate student where you should be always working is still has carried over into my work as a tenure-track faculty here at UMKC. And I think part of it, cause that's what I'm, I'm used to, like, there is a timeline, there is, you know, deadlines to meet, you should be on top of things. And so you should kind of like be working so that way you can finish on time. And so what I've tried to do is kind of like realize, "Oh, I can kind of like slow down now." And then allow myself the space to do other things that's not related to work. So one of the things that I've been trying to be really good about is like letting campus be the place where I do work.

So I'm usually on campus by say 10 o'clock in the morning. And then I try to stay through four o'clock. and of course that depends on my schedule if I have an evening class and maybe sometimes I'll be coming back to campus after dinner, but usually 10 to four is that space to get things done, to go to meetings, to have conversations with students and to write, and to research and then using home afterwards as a space to really just like calm down and tend to my own life and tend to my own body in a very healthy way. Unless there's something like this with like something that's really pressing that I need to attend to that really can't wait until tomorrow. That has not gone as well as I wanted to do, because when I get home, I'm kind of pressured into getting excited for some kind of work. And so I ended up doing work over time anyway. What has been helpful though, is really trying to, schedule different activities with friends.

So I have my happy hour friends, and I know every week at five o'clock on Wednesday, it's going to be happy hour. Or I have a, my, a friend of mine in Madison who plays video games on the Nintendo Switch. So we schedule a time when I can just play Smash Bros. with him on the Nintedo Switch. So that kind of approach to knowing that, Oh, each week there is something that's going to be, be done has been helpful and making sure that I don't use my evening times for work, but like people are kind of like forcing me to socialize or getting me to socialize in these kind of different ways. So it's a, it's a process still, to remind myself that I'm not in graduate school and that those practices were useful there. But, you know. "Open up, slow down," is what I'm, I keep telling myself,

**NR:** I must tell you you're doing a great job of maintaining the worklife balance with all activities and consciously making an effort of not working after the working hours. I think we all should do that more even as graduate students, because it's such an important part of life, you know, balancing both the things. You've been mentioning quite a lot about, you know, making friends or you know, your apartment and like having these happy hours every week. One of the things that I'm worried about moving to a new city for a job is about, you know, getting to know people or the social life looking for apartments and those sorts of things that, I mean, everybody knows like kind of what is to be done. Cause we've moved in the past for different universities and things like those. But this seems like more of a permanent settlement than the, I don't think that we do in life like school. So do you want to give us some advice on that?

**AB:** Yeah, I definitely like what you say about, like you're stepping into a place that's kind of permanent. Because it, it took a moment to realize, that this could be, this could be home if I wanted it to be for a long time that the journey has, so to speak, come to an end. And I think part of that is a slow process to kind of realize that in, in some ways, reaching out to others to socialize can be a welcome way of really solidifying that sense that you could be here, a bit longer. And that could be a really joyful moment. One of my, experiences have been just like the openness of faculty to my colleagues here in, at UMKC, where they instantly said, "Hey, we do bar trivia on Fridays or on Tuesdays, you know, come out, you can meet other people outside of academia, but who may have graduated from UMKC." And that has been a very helpful way of getting in is by having other people step in and say inviting me to different types of things. But as far as like, being responsible for yourself, where someone doesn't do the invitation, part of it is just inviting yourself to different things. You just kinda like show up and see what's going on and being willing to do that.

So like I like live music. I enjoy, listening to a live band and. You know, there's actually plenty of places I think here in Kansas City, where you can go to a place and see a local band play some music. So thanks to Facebook and its wonders of sending me random invites the things I'm wonderfully kept abreast of events that happen here in Kansas city. And so sometimes I'm like, "Oh, I think I will go to this, this music show. Or maybe I will go to this really interesting, interesting lecture and then, and see what's really happening." It's really having a spirit of exploration and being able to do that from time to time, has been, very helpful for me and kind of like building up relationships over time. So yeah, I think that's how it's been. I'm kind of an introvert. So the, the social distancing thing is a little bit in my wheelhouse, so to speak. So just kind of like going into your own comfort zone and what you want to do like that. That's, that's my general advice. Just show up to things and then see what happens.

**NR:** So we just talked about having connections or having a network to help you get outside. Do you have advice for the network again, in terms of trying to get a job or any other advice for people on the job market?

**AB:** Yeah. So, I've been kind of like, been thinking about, about this, especially since, I had, had finished and it was actually around a year ago that I had completed the job market and I feel like one of the pieces of advice for going on the job market is kind of remember that you're a human being w ith, like a bundle of, of dreams and desires and given that, it's okay. And also be willing to say no to anything that won't actually fulfill or kind of speak to your own humanity or that doesn't speak to your sense of, "What is a well-lived life look like for me?" Or "What does, what is wellbeing or a fulfilled life look like to me?" And if that isn't something that, will come, come to me through this particular job opportunity, then I should be willing to say "No." I think there can be a lot of pressure at the end to, you know, find the job because you know, a lot is, I mean, there can be a lot on board. You could be thinking about the finances, for example, maybe you have student loans to think about, or maybe you have to take care of family and, you know, making that, that jump from graduate school to full-time pay would be really great. And of course that that's, you know, everyone is kind of different, but at the same time being willing to say "No," as a core thing.

I said no to a couple of opportunities that I knew wasn't going to be fulfilling. or that didn't seem to speak to my own humanity. And so I, I deliberately said no to a couple of options, even though, you know, there's, there's no scheduled interview, there's no campus visit. You know that this, this offer could be it, you know, that that could be the only thing, but I would rather like know that there's a life that I can have that really speaks to what I think is a good fulfilled life. Then to step into something that I don't particularly enjoy or see that I would not enjoy in the long run.

So I, that would be my general advice is like, kinda like, think that you are a human being and being willing to say no, and know those desires and what's out there and what you can kind of get from it. I've, I've seen friends who even have said no to PhD, even though they've gone quite a ways through it. But they finally said no. And at least in my experience, they found something that was worthwhile. They, they took those PhD skills and leveraged it into something that was so much better than they, than they actually thought possible. And, and now I'm bothering them to help me with my professional and technical writing courses.

[laughter]

**NR:** That's the way to do it.

**WF:** So, could you talk to us a little bit more about where this like deliberation over no came from? Like, is this something that kind of developed through your experiences as a graduate student? Or is this like just a personal trait? It was like, I know my worth, I know what to say no to if I'm not being appreciated or fulfilled, or this is just not good. Could you talk to us a little bit about how to develop that mentality?

**AB:** I think, I think part of it was kind of like, hearing some of the experiences of other people. So I think it was maybe, maybe it was like, two years before I went on the job market. I went home to Alabama to visit friends and family. And I was seeing some old friends from undergrad and my master's and we were having dinner. and I remember, they were kind of like talking about, you know, you know, what's happening at the university, you know, what's going on. And one of the things that they were really talking about is that idea of knowing your worth. There were some, some events that have happened in their own lives, where they decided, you know, there was an agreement that this is the kind of support that I would get. And that support is not coming here in the way that I expected. And they said that they were willing to go ahead and look for other opportunities and that, what you said, Wil, about like knowing your worth was exactly what they had said is like, you know, if you're going on the job market and you're going into your next step, Antonio, know your worth, you know, know who you are and, and what kind of work that you're willing to do. And if that's not something that's being given back to you then know your worth. So part of it was learning from other people.

And then another part of it was my own personal experience too. like I was really interested in getting any kind of job. so I applied to 60 or 70 jobs from non tenure track to administrator [laughter] I see that look on your face, Wil.

**WF:** We've heard some numbers through these interviews, and I'm always just shocked.

**AB:** Well, you know, once you get the cover, what's the cover once you're like really confident in your cover letter and your materials, you just send them out. Just send them out, just make it rain on the job market with your materials. Here are all these documents take them. But yeah, like, and eventually I did very well in terms of the responses to my applications and the interviews. And by the time I decided to accept a position here at UMKC, I realized that I could have kept going. There were more interviews. I could have kept going well into the end of spring, possibly with interviews and campus visits, in particular. But, but going back to this idea of like recognizing your humanity, I was just kind of tired, from being on planes and, in particular, cause it was like a lot of travel and I appreciated the, a lot of the opportunities that were given to me, but I also recognize that at some point I kind of have to, you know, just kind of slow down and say, "No." This is great opportunities, but you know, I should also say no to these opportunities, especially when I came to a point where I was really happy at the same time with what I'm, how I had performed in what the interest was on the job market. So that was another reason why I kind of said no. So as a way to kind of like cultivate it, definitely, speak to what other people experiences are when they had to make those kinds of decisions. Whether it, you, whether you asked for it directly, or it just comes up in conversations, but also kind of like, again, remembering your, your own sense of your own wellbeing. What is your body doing? What is your mind saying? And yeah. And then kind of like stepping into that kind of tough decision. I think, I think that could be one way to kind of cultivate it, but it started with hearing what other people had said--wiser people--I think is what made it possible. Cause then I can say to myself, "Oh, I can do that. That's an option because my mentor did it."

**NR:** Yeah. I struggled a lot with saying no. So this is really helpful. You know, talking to people, or wiser people, I consider you now to be this wise person, you know, who is it's on the other side after, you know, saying no and thinks about, does not have any regrets about making that choice. So, I think that's really great. For me, I probably, I got it wrong. Just tell me if that's right, but you're saying that when you're applying in the applications process, we should apply to as many jobs out there as possible. But later on when we are interviewing that's when we get to the point of saying no, or did you have reservations even when you were applying about what job you want to go to or not. Because what happens is that, I feel that, you know, I'm good with tech comm. And then I wanted the more tech comm-y kind of jobs and UX kind of jobs. But I'm also on the side of, on the rhetorical side of tech comm, but then to get into a rhetoric position, I might have to update my application and cover letter and all those things so much that that's going to be work, but if I push myself, I'll still get through it. But is that a place where I should say no?

**WF:** Mm

**AB:** Hmm. Yeah, I think, I mean, I, and kind of like, with your question about, like, especially when thinking about like these different types of expertise that you can step into, I was also kind of like faced with that because I was thinking about like all of what kind of experiences that I had gathered in, in graduate school and recognizing that there was some possibilities that I could go off into other areas like you were saying. So definitely I thought that I could just kind of like leverage all of my experiences to these different types of jobs. So I was assistant director for the writing center at UW-Madison for a year, and I thought I could definitely apply to a job in the writing center, you know, as a, as assistant director or director. I had done some work, some work in professional technical writing in the past or in certainly work that was adjacent to it. So I thought, okay, well I'll just go ahead and apply to that as well. Making those kinds of little slight adjustments. My own philosophy was to just kind of like leverage all of the experience that I had and put it into that application process. Like leave no stone unturned. I, I dunno. I think th at if that's how you want to approach things, if you want to take like all of your experiences and kind of like put them in off into different directions. I think, I think there's a lot of value in that, but I think there's also a value in being purposeful in focusing on what it is that you really want to do.

I mean, there's nothing really wrong with that, that to say I'm going to focus even, so for example, even though I had like that work as assistant director for the writing center, it would have been fine for me to say that that's not my area, especially cause I recognize that there were other areas that I was more interested in or that I would definitely be stronger in presenting myself than just that writing center work, I think I would have been fine if I had just like decided to put those types of jobs to the side and pay more to my own strengths.

So I would say that to kind of like use it as a framework. What kind of pieces of yourself do you want to submit to others? Based on what your own desires are and what you want to really do. I think that that could be the approach. Think about yourself, the self. Yeah.

**NR:** Yeah. Did you have anything else that you wanted to talk about in your notes maybe or somewhere, Antonio?

**WF:** Yeah. Yeah. Is there anything else that you'd want to?

**AB:** Well I guess, and of course this may be helpful, to add into it. Cause I know there was the question before about the, you know, the transition into teaching. graduate courses as tenure track faculty. one thing that, I had not mentioned that that maybe could be useful also, is just kind of like the, the expansion of knowing more about how all of the different pieces of the university worked compared to being a graduate student. Cause as a graduate student, largely responsible for just knowing, Knowing the people in my, in my own little world, like my fellow graduate students or my other graduate students, other faculty, who was the director of writing center work, who leads composition. I, I did some classes as a minor. So being responsible for knowing those faces in curriculum and instruction, where I took my minor courses at UW-Madison, but here at UMKC, and it could be the same for other faculties, like there's just like this huge explosion of names of different departments. Like the English department is in the College of Arts and Sciences, which is part of 16 other departments. And once a month, all of those faculty gathee in one room to talk about the concerns of the College of Arts and Sciences.

And then there's the provost and the chancellor and the provost has like six different things going on. And then there are business cards going out from everyone because everyone's excited that you're on campus and really want to do work with you. So I think that could like build, get kind of go into graduate coursework is that there's so many ways to like collaborate. With other people that your expertise is recognized on campus. And that means there's lots of ways that you can kind of like collaborate and work with others and see where your work overlaps with other colleagues. And in that sense, you can really work together on how the build up graduate work or graduate curriculum on campus. So that's been one of the great things is that there's lots of opportunities to collaborate and help help you think through how to work in a graduate course. Cause I got lots of good advice to help me think through things.

**WF:** Nice. That's super helpful. I think it's something that I never really thought about through my undergrad and through my masters about how the university actually works. Like, outside of just my professor being there, teaching me in the classroom, but like everything that goes into making that class of thing and the department a thing, I think that's really important because now in this PhD, I've gotten really good mentorship from other graduate students in my program and just other folks that I know here at MSU, and I'm getting a really good sense of how a university operates, especially now with, you know, capital everything happening. So yeah, I think that's really key. That's really cool. Thank you for that.

**AB:** Yeah. And I was just kind of like wondering I'm like, where are you all in terms of where you're in your graduate work? Are you approaching the job market? Are you coming to an end? I know this, this interview is a lot about me, but I'm kind of like curious, what's going on with you? Where are you all? How are your feelings? And especially in the sense of capital everything.

**WF:** Well, I just defended my dissertation prospectus this past Friday.

**AB:** Oh yeah. That's right!

**WF:** Yes. So now I'm PhD candidate, wow.

**AB:** Ooh!

**WF:** Yeah. She's on her way! [laughter] And Nupoor recently defended, I think, right?

**NR:** Yeah, I defeneded. I'm also a PhD candidate. I'm on the job market next year, yeah

**WF:** Me too,

**NR:** Yeah Wil, too. We both will be. Sorry, my battery, my headphones battery is running out, so I have to...

**AB:** That's okay! Oh, I wish I asked these questions before we started, but I got in, got caught up in the moment of setting up for the podcast.

**WF:** Oh no, you're fine!

**NR:** Yeah! You did great. I think one of the themes that I was really looking at was how to listen to yourself. Listen to wiser people. Listen to your own body, your own head. And I think that that was a, that was a very good thing that came out of this podcast. That was really great.

**WF:** Yeah. Well, Antonio, thank you so much for, for speaking with us today. We really appreciate it. do you want to tell people where they can find you like a faculty website or a Twitter or a LinkedIn account or anything like that?

**AB:** Yes. you can follow me on Twitter, at @AntonioWrites. I don't know why I can't. Hold on. Let me make sure I remember my own handle. It's @AntonioWrites, right?

**NR:** Is it Dr. Macaroni Toni?

**AB:** Yes! Okay. Antonio,

**NR:** That is @AntonioWrites, I see you there.

**AB:** People can find me at Antonio rights at Twitter. Antonio W-R-I-T-E-S.

**WF:** And we can always link it in the show notes and everything like that. So, nice. Well, thank you for your time again. Stay safe and, good luck with everything.

**AB:** Thank you so much and good luck to you all. Congratulations on on the next step.

**NR:** Thank you, thanks for being with us.

**WF:** Yeah, thank you!

**AB:** The next step of your graduate careers. [laughter] Thanks!

**NR:** Alright, bye bye.

**WF:** Bye!