

The Resistance Podcast // Episode 29 // Mahogany Browne

Matt: Hello, and welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host. Today, I'm thrilled to sit down with Mahogany L. Browne, who is, actually you wear several hats: way more than just poet and author and speaker. You're also a community organizer. All manner of things. How are you today?

Mahogany: I'm good. I'm good. Thanks for having me.

Matt: Yeah. By the way, how many different hats do you think you wear in a given season?

Mahogany: Sure. That would be writer, and organizer, but also performer, educator, and curator. I used to just say poet, and then I realized that the poetry was living in all these other different disciplines, so I didn't want to dishonor all of the work and also make it so that I forget that, I don't know.

Writing has been a large part of my life for a very long time, since fourth grade, actually. I decided I was going to be a novelist. I thought I'd be a novelist on the weekend and a pediatrician during the week. And then I saw blood, and it was all different then. After that quick pivot, writing has always been in my bones. So those are the five, yeah.

Matt: Love it. I actually want to go back there in just a minute, but I want to start where we begin each episode just to get your take on how you would respond to this quote. It comes from Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. And Steven writes this: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the unlived life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." I guess at this point in your career or life, what form does resistance take for you, maybe in the creative process or the person you want to be. How are you battling that?

Mahogany: I love that quote, because it is a constant, right? There's constant tension. We're in constant flux. We are not the same people we were a year ago. Honestly, we're not the same people we were 5 months ago. Looking at this pandemic. You come to terms with the person you are, right? You can't turn away from it. So the resistance that lives between those evolving selves, it depends on the day, it depends on the obstacle. Let me think. And of course, the craft. Yikes.

When I first started writing, between me and being published, the thing that was in the middle of that, in the way of that, was the ideas of who I was supposed to be, so say my family. And what a real job was, because nobody had ever heard "writer" or "poet" as an occupation. It was just like, no. You're going to work for the State of California, and you will be happy with that job, and you get to type on your day off. It was one of those things. You can type in your down time, if you feel like typing. So that was a resistance.

And then moving to New York as a journalist, and finding that sexism ran rampant, that the patriarchy was very much alive. Even though I didn't have the articulation for it, I recognized it. That was in the middle of me publishing the stories that really moved my blood. Moving to poetry within that time at New York as a full-time occupation, specifically performance poetry, before I thought I was good enough for journals or thought my voice belonged in journals, the resistance then became reminding people that there is craft in so many different dialects, that there is necessary art from so many people from different walks of life. It couldn't just be the MFA program, and it couldn't just be from this specific region of the world, and it couldn't just

come in a body that looks like mine or theirs or whatever. The gatekeepers really had me fooled in believing that I had to subscribe to a certain kind of voice for my poetry to be valid.

So I'm still there in that part of the resistance, because now I'm fighting from the inside out. I'm making sure that the people that are, even like Poem A Day. I was able to curate Poem A Day for the Academy of American Poets. It's a small run. It was two weeks. I went looking for folks that are rarely recognized in these learning spaces, these teaching spaces, as a part of the academic language. But they're the people that you ask to come and talk to your students. So you have that moment where you're like, oh, I'm good enough for you to put me on stage, but you don't see the value when it's on the page. I decided that was my chance to fracture that idea and bring forth those voices, especially because I was told very early that my voice, my likeness, the things I was talking about, was irrelevant. It was like, "It's so..." I won't say, they didn't say *passé*, but they meant it. They meant fleeting. They meant it wasn't worthy, honestly. That's what they meant.

So from the inside out, now here I am, after getting my MFA from Pratt Institute for their inaugural class of the Writing and Activism program. And I went in there, and I just dug my heels in. I was like, I'm not going to write with whatever you decide I need to, no. I'm writing this way. And I can articulate why I'm choosing to write this way, which was such a blessing. I went in as an adult, so I was able to stand up and say, "My voice is my valid, whichever way, as long as I can make you understand why I chose these spaces, and why I chose to not capitalize, and why I break down the word "Black" in print, and it goes from "B-l-a-c-k" and then after a moment of violence to this Black girl, it goes to "Bl-ck" and then more violence and then it's "Blk" and then more violence and then the B is, you remove the capitalization from the "B." And I was seriously making sure I understood why those acts of violence could break down a young Black girl's identity to believe she was the lowest common denominator when it came to who's willing to fight for her. Who's willing to protect her.

I was very lucky. My mentors and my writing director of the program, they were all about it. They were like, "If you can explain it, let's go." But I understand listening to other stories that most people don't get that. They get the, "We don't get it, so you shouldn't publish. And then we're just taking away all guidance if you're not listening." And I didn't have that, but I think a large part of that had to do with me running towards the fear of not being understood, and me using the resistance as a jump rope, rather than okay, this is blocking me off. So the elasticity, obviously jump rope makes it sound really fun, and it's not. But I decided I wasn't going to let reign me in and pull me away from my goals.

Matt: Is that pretty characteristic for you? You said, "I ran toward the fear." Most people don't have that instinct. Is that pretty true for you, even going back to childhood? Is that a common posture for you toward fear?

Mahogany: I want to say yes, but that wouldn't be true. I learned that. I learned that, especially after I think my twenties. I've always been kind of adversarial. I've always been told I'm not enough. As a Black girl, you should have this skin tone, you should have straighter teeth, you should remove the gap. The fact that I just had all of these ideas put on top of my head before I ever could realize that it was their ideas for me, not for myself. So for awhile I listened, and then I realized that it got me nowhere. I was still scared. I was still sad, and I still wasn't enough. At the end of the day, I'm never going to be, whoever the world decides you should be, I'm not going to be that. I'm going to be me, because it's ever-changing. The ideas of what is beautiful is very different. Who we decided was beautiful in this country has changed drastically over the last 20 years, just looking at it. That is different. So to understand that I would always be

chasing someone else's idea of success and enough and worthiness, I just didn't want to do that anymore. High school, I think, was enough. High school, that was the key. And when I got to be early twenties and moved to New York, I saw, ooh, this happened in high school. I was able to connect quickly with certain behaviors. And I thought, mmm. That's when I started just being like, whatever. To the wind. Let's go.

So my articulation came later when I read Audre Lorde. And just her ability to wrap that fear up and use it as fuel. I really wanted to do that. That became the blueprint of how I walked in a room and how I show up on the page, and how I ignite stages and curate spaces. It is Audre Lorde's voice. It is June Jordan's voice. It is Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, and even Ida B. Wells.

So these people were like, what is fear? That's a spice, at this point. It's everywhere, and you can't run from it. You just have to run towards it. Because at the end of it, you realize the fear was really just you being in your own way, more times than not. That's a healthy fear. But the reality is, mmm, I mean, I don't even know if there's healthy fear for me, because I cliff dive. I do, I jump off cliffs: Jamaica and Hawai'i. I jumped off the bridge in New Zealand. I just was like, I want to feel it. I want to feel that rush and be able to name it and taste it, because when I write, I want to be able to access it. It won't be this generated idea via Google. This will be something I lived.

And every day, there's a kind of fear that we have to access, especially now. Some folks who are like, "Oh my god, I didn't realize it was this bad." I receive those text messages. And I'm like, "Yeah, welcome. Been here. Take your shoes off at the door. We have work to do." So yeah. I do walk towards the fear. I don't say that it gets any easier. I just know that the reward is far greater.

Matt: Earlier, you were describing sort of the path toward, the resistance of being validated, and having all these things want to disqualify you, devalue you, or tell you you're not worth. How much of that, I just know in my own story, others that I talk to, that often serves as a continual fuel. In short, that there's really almost an inability to completely get over that, for some people, so they maintain that edge of proving those voices wrong, even as they're very, very successful, that that kind of never leaves them. How much of that is present for you, and how much do you feel like you're over, or have moved beyond sort of needing to prove those wrong in some way?

Mahogany: Oh no. I think, it never, unless you are able to write from a space of, no matter what I write I am going to be published, or no matter what I write, I don't care if I'm published, because I have a living, I'm making a living that does not depend on this being published, on my voice being listed, on being, the list of who you remember and a hundred great books, those things are amazing for book sales, and it's amazing for the accolades and the nod and the recognition, but it's also painful. It's painful for people to realize, "Oh no. Even in this list of indie books, I'm not even top 100. What does that mean? Should I be creating art?"

And I'm glad that people challenge that idea. There can't be one list that decides for all of us. Make your own list, you know what I mean? There are so many lists that we are not heralding as the list to go to, because of maybe the followship or the viewership; however, those are usually the best lists. Those are the most innovative, they're the most daring. You are giving us something that everyone hasn't just put their stamp on because this is the trend. You're doing some actual trench work. You're doing real work. You're making us do work. When you put together these anti-racist book clubs, which, okay. I feel like that list has existed all along. We just put a new title on top of it. But you should already be reading that stuff. But I get it. Some

people didn't know the language, and here we are. But if you have the access. If you, yourself, are a reader, put that list together and share it. Once we start generating our own lists, then we stop looking to others to validate us. I went on a tangent. I forgot the end of your question.

Matt: Yeah, I was just asking about how much you're still fueled by those voices.

Mahogany: Oh, yes. So I definitely am a child of adversarial. I love it. I play dominoes, I play spades, I used to play softball and basketball. So I realized a lot of that adversarial energy, that's the sweet spot for me. So when people were telling me, "You shouldn't do this, and you shouldn't sound like this," really I realize now, that was probably like aphrodisiac, because I'm like, "Love it. I'm about to stay right here and make you mad every time you see me. Ahh." That's not the best way to be, but yeah. I really just decided I wasn't, not to say it doesn't hurt later. Because of course, when you are off stage, and you are by yourself, you have to look yourself in the mirror, you start wondering if everything that everyone says about you is true. And then you have to come to terms with, do you love yourself whether it's true or not? And if there's a thing that you can lead with from here on out, what would that be, and how do you do that? And it's time to do that.

How do you sleep at night? That's really what it is for me now. It used to just be, I want to be adversarial, and I'm going to walk into it, and I don't care, and then my feelings would be hurt. Then some lone little girl would send me an email after performing that same poem that was trashed, would send me an email saying, "Thank you. I never saw myself in poetry until you." And then of course, well these are the women I see now. These are the people who brought me up, and I just introduced a new reader to the fold. And I had to be clear. I may not be everybody's poet. But I'm mine. I may not be everybody's writer, but I'm my own. And if I can just show, I guess I'd say my platform, I've been writing for Black girls all of my life, if I could just show Black girls that they are necessary in all shades, shapes, whatever walk of life, this is for you. You deserve to be here. If I could just do that, then I've done it right.

Black Girl Magic, poem that came out I think it was like 2015? Maybe '16? We did it for PBS, and then it went viral. I thought, oh this is going to be a blowaway. No one cares about Black girls. Like really. We'll put up Bring Back Our Girls, but who's really going to go fight for Black girls? And we have all of these young girls go missing here, and who really fights for them? So this is going to be a blip, I thought. And when it went viral, I said, Oh. Okay. All right. So we are here. You just have to speak it at a different frequency. And you have to put yourself in a space where you were talking regardless of who decides you deserve to speak about this thing. If you believe it, write it. And if you write it, share it.

And that poem moved in ways I never could imagine, and that helped me get my first illustrated book deal with MacMillan, which led to a five-book deal, and of course my YA novel which is coming out next year with another publisher, but all of that came from Black Girl Magic. I just never would have, I just never would have considered this was the poem. I just couldn't see it. I couldn't see it, because for so long, I had been told, no one cares about Black girls but Black girls. And I just had to keep trying to take the hinges off the door. Like, that's fine, I'm still going to talk to Black girls, because we are worth it. And I know what it's like to go through your life thinking you are not enough. And who cares if you are here? And we love your style, but we don't love you. And so my poems, they will remain to be a lighthouse in those troubled waters.

Matt: That's wonderful. I love that description, too, as a lighthouse. By the way, if I asked for your most lighthouse moment for you, is there a moment you recall from youth or even adulthood that captures that for you most?

Mahogany: There's two. There's two moments. One is when a little girl, maybe she was six or seven, she was in an oratory competition in Florida. She memorized Black Girl Magic. And a friend asked her if she could do the poem again so they could record it and send it to me, and when I tell you that was it. That ended. I was like, oh. Okay. It was just the most amazing thing I've ever seen. Ever. Ever. To date.

The second amazing lighthouse moment, it still, with that poem specifically, I was able to read that poem to open up for Sister Sonia Sanchez, and even the poem's layout, I shout out Sonia Sanchez, because she's very big on roll calls. And the books, the flaps, are names of women, Black women that bring me into spaces, both celebrity and familial. And of course I cite her as the reason I am doing this roll call. And I was able to give her the book, and of course we've worked on murals together, and so I was able to perform the poem for her, and she said, "That's my favorite poem, Mahogany. That's my favorite poem of yours." And that was it. I was like, I have made it. Everything else, shut it down. Close the shutters. Out for the season. If the season is a lifetime, I'm done. Hang it up. There's nothing else I need to do here. Nothing else I need to do here. Sister Sonia Sanchez knows my name. Nothing else I need to do here. She likes this poem. I'm done.

Matt: As you reflect back on your own experience, who was that lighthouse for you? You mentioned some names earlier, but was there one that serves as the brightest?

Mahogany: I think like a pillar for me would definitely be Patricia Smith. She is also to me, like when I found her work, and I got to take a workshop with her, she was the voice that I was always responding to when I wrote. She was the sun that I walked towards. And her writing, her being, that made me understand, like there has to be space for you here. She is a Black girl through and through. She is a Black woman. But there is no shame when she's writing about love and sex and mass incarceration and family and murder and death. And then of course, who else can personify Hurricane Katrina? Nobody but her. She is definitely a pillar.

In my contemporary days, she was the first famous poet I'd say that I was able to write with and work with, and since then, she babysat my daughter when I had a show near Tarrytown. She gave me a blurb for my first full-length collection. She's the one who told me, "You need to apply to the Cave Canem retreat. Let's go. You should do it." And I thought, no, I don't have a degree. And I heard, and I don't think. And she said, "No." Because I thought, if I hear you don't want me here, there's just going to be spaces that I'm not going to try and get to at some point. I just don't care. I'm going to make an adjacent space. And she said, "No, no, no. You belong everywhere. Come on. Do this application. Let me know when it's put in." I was like, okay. That's it. She said. She said, make it so.

Of course, I applied and didn't get in. But it was a good start. It was a good start. Because when I told her, I didn't even talk about it. I just didn't get in. And I was like, I knew it. I knew I wasn't going to get in, because my voice....A year later, I decide, oh no. I wanted to go really bad, as well, because Lucille Clifton was the guest. So I didn't get in. The next year, Sister Lucille Clifton passed. And so then, it was a year break. And at that point, Patricia was a part of my circle, so checking in was easy enough, and she said, "Did you apply?" And I said, "I'm not applying. Because they didn't let me in last time, so I'm not going back." And she said, "Mahogany, you have to. It's an application. Come on." So I just said no. And I didn't worry about it. And then the year after that, she hits me again, same time, same rhyme. "Did you apply? Did you do it?" And I said, "No, I didn't do it. I'm not going to." And she said, "Mahogany, Ntozake Shange is going to be there." And I said, "Oh, okay. I'm about to go apply." And that is the year I got in. That is the year I got in. But also, the world that opened up with me again, walk into the fear.

What are they going to do? The most they'll do is say no. What is the fear? The fear is of being told no? Or the fear is having to face the idea that you're not good enough. And that's a whole bunch of other work that has nothing to do with them. And so I had to just jump in and swim, and in that case, it worked that time. But it did change my life, being a part of Cave Canem. Meeting Toi Derricotte. Ntozake Shange, I met her there first. Sapphire, the writer, I met her there. Amiri Baraka, I met him there first, and then went on to open up to him in this weird space in Colorado at a college, maybe. Cornelius Eady and Terrance Hayes. I mean, I was very lucky. I was very lucky.

I feel like anyone who's able to get into those spaces, it is not everything, but it is a beginning. It's just a beginning of you finding ways to talk about your poetry in spaces that constantly feel like it's judging you just for being. I'm judged for being Black, and I'm judged for being woman, and I'm judged for speaking a certain way and speak in a certain tone, and not being feminine enough, and being too feminine, all these parameters for what is enough. I think it's a constant for everyone. And in that particular space, I finally got to, I didn't have to talk about the majority of the things that drove me, like why do you care about what color my hair is today, or why? It's not your business. No, you can't touch my hair. You have those things that are like, those, they say microaggressions. And then someone said, no, they're not micro. But you're constantly fighting off the cultural, not differences but like ignorance. I am not your Google. I'm not. I'm not your Google. You can go look it up. You can read the books. And even before Google, there were books. There were magazines. You can involve yourself in learning about other people than what we've been conditioned to consider as normal. As average.

So I didn't have to think about that there. So there's a certain piece of armor that I put down. And the writing became more vulnerable, because I'm not holding up all of this armor to assure that you don't talk about your maid to me, which definitely happened in a writing workshop. You think you're going in for an art and craft space, and you realize you're there to get through their racism. And that's shit. That sucks. That does not feel good. And honestly, most of us aren't even prepared for that kind of legwork. That emotional labor you're not paying for. You're paying for a writing workshop, and I'm not even the facilitator. That's what. I'm a peer. I paid to be here, too. And here I am facilitating. What? No. No, man. I just want to write. I just want to write. And now, I have to write about your ass. Because you got all up in my way, and here it is. Racism again.

Really, I feel like racism is a large part of the resistance work, because a lot of us are trying to heal from the abuse that we've received as normal behavior in everyday interactions. And then the gaslighting that exists, which is to say, like "no, no, no, I didn't mean it like that." Or "they're a good person" or "they're not racist because they date someone who's of a different ethnicity." Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, got it. And I have to write about your ass, too. I have to just get it off of me so that I can get to the actual story I want to write about. Missing my father, who's been incarcerated for the majority of my life. I want to write about my mother, who has survived addiction. I want to write about my daughter, and the fear I have, being a single mother for so long. Then, of course, the things, the pitfalls I don't want her to subscribe to.

And then I want to write about love. I want to write about geese. I want to write about manatees. I would love to just look at nature and let that metaphor swallow me up, and then me come out reborn. I would love that. But guess what I've got to do to even get to that nature. I've got to stomp through the shit that you have laid as a country, as easy as it is, you think it's a throwaway, but that has so much, slavery and racism and sexism and the patriarchy, and the white supremacist machine has so much, is so much embedded in our everydayness. Our DNA

is messed up. And so the things that we do are actually dysfunctional. We do it as a throwaway, a fleeting thing. "I didn't mean it like that. It was a joke." That's dysfunction. Because if someone looked at this from a screen on a TV, it would be, you would see the POV. The POV would change. You would see, oh. What happens to them is they go home. When they go home, this is who doesn't get to eat, because now they're depressed. Or this is who's hurt, or this is who doesn't have a home. And now they never, all these things are connected.

We have to look at our hand in it and be accountable. We have to be accountable. We have to do better. It can't be a "I'm human" because we're all human. If you are human and you make mistakes, and you know that you have to learn something. And if you have to learn something, do not do it off the backs of other people. Put your skin in the game. Be uncomfortable. You be uncomfortable holding that mess. Don't put it on someone else and have them suss through what you're trying to say and they give it back to you all shiny and gleaming. You take care of it. You do that work.

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