

# Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

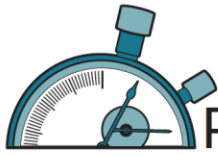
## Book Review: Richardson's *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*

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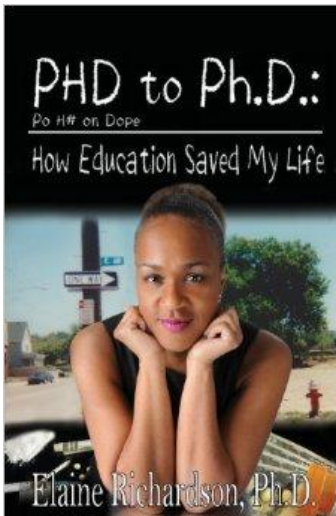




# Book Review: Richardson's *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*

Tamika L. Carey

Richardson, Elaine. *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*. Philadelphia, PA: New City Press, Print.

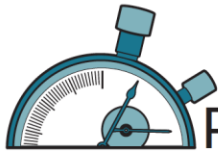


Scholarship in rhetoric and composition still overwhelmingly privileges seemingly "neutral" or "logic" based argumentative strategies and styles. Despite this paradigm, there is a note on which we can generally agree: in the face of

institutional racism or illogical violence, there are few things as subversive or transformative as a survivor's testimony, particularly when it calls attention to systems of power. Elaine Richardson delivers a powerful one in *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*. Inspired by her daughters to "tell the truth" about her life, the scholar's third single-authored book chronicles her journey from being what she calls a "Po H# on Dope" to becoming an award-winning tenured professor and a professional recording artist (vii). The path she takes readers on is a winding one that involves multiple rapes, an abortion at the age of thirteen, teen prostitution, an unsuccessful attempt at college, a multi-year stint as a sex-worker, abusive

relationships, physical attacks, drug addiction, trips to jail, rehab, and more. Yet, by unpacking the factors that led her to buy into what she describes as the lost commandment that "thou shalt not love a girl from the hood" throughout the early portions of her life, Richardson's book makes a still urgent call (162). As scholars and teachers of discourse, we have a responsibility to stay awake to the ways matters of race, gender, social class, and more converge to wound people of color. Moreover, we must continually refine how we understand the relationship between culturally responsive literacy practices, educational access, and personal well-being.

Richardson's latest book joins an influential body of narrative-based scholarship that includes such works as Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self: A Study in Language Competence*, Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, and Vershawn Young's *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*. Where *PHD to Ph.D.* takes this corpus in new directions is in the broader audience Richardson imagines for her story. As she confesses, survival bears responsibility, and she has committed to using her "life to mentor, mother, and sister others" (163). Richardson's method involves mapping her self-making process, or asking the questions of "who am I?" and "how did I become this way?" that Vivian Gornick considers a function of the memoir genre (93). Although the book is organized



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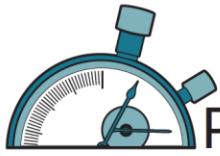
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chronologically, the journey Richardson relives in *PHD to Ph.D.* is far from a linear. As such, it is helpful to use what I see as the three instructional process and landscapes as a frame for understanding Richardson's argument about the redemptive potential of education.

The first two chapters of Richardson's book reflect what we may understand as a "home schooling" process, or one wherein people are directly or indirectly taught to understand themselves in society by family members or situations they observe and encounter within their immediate environments. These two chapters also introduce the at-times conflicting themes of self-pride, educational access, personal resilience, insecurity, trauma, and wellness that circulate throughout *PHD to Ph.D.* In "Where I Come From," the book's opening chapter, the author describes her childhood family dynamic in Cleveland. From the earliest moments, both of her parents invest in preparing her for life as a young African American woman. Her father models the virtues of discipline, self-education, and sobriety through his studies in "Mentalphysics," the Bible the Black Muslims, and his admonishments against drug use. Her mother's influence is stronger in the book because the experience of being taken out of school at a young age to work has rendered her a Jamaican woman in America with "God given potential" and "mother-wit" but "zero oppachunity" (2). Although her mother supports every traditional education endeavor Richardson undertakes and tries to attain every resource to help her daughter be successful, Mama's use of Black oral traditions enables her to impart values of self-knowledge and self-affirmation that seem to resonate. Mama dispenses the culturally based epistemologies she assumes will help her daughter move through the world with agency through such personal proverbs as "Hahd wuk

nevah kill," "if yuh cyan hear, yuh will feel," and the overarching motif about self-worth that reverberates throughout the book, "Shame chree dead" (Shame tree is the spirit of self-worth inside you. Shame chree dead is said when that spirit is broken)"(2). Readers familiar with the author's scholarship in literacy may recognize an inspiration for such essays as "To Protect and Serve: African American Female Literacies" in the sacrifices Richardson's mother makes.

*PHD to Ph.D.* also makes visible for us the distinction between these internal processes of enculturation and external forms of social conditioning that shape the self-esteem of Black girls. The contrast is evident by the end of the second chapter, "Sights, Sounds, My Wounds/My Womb." While Richardson's formal childhood education is uneventful, the messages she receives at home and in her neighborhood have a deeper impact. Her memory of unsuccessful attempts at gardening with her father and discovering that "[h]ardly anything or anyone could grow there without being torn down" is symbolic of the socialization process she experiences (11). Richardson demonstrates how quickly young Black women are taught their place in the world by revisiting moments of gender bias, instances of colorism, merciless teasing from childhood peers, the overt ways Black girls are sexualized in the eyes of others, and the traumas children can experience when they watch violence, like the fight her parents had and the family just "lived over" without addressing (18). The results are both honest and heartbreaking, particularly as she explains the after effects of the early rape she experiences with the realization that "[w]hatever self-esteem I had died with the rape and the baby"(30). By making the sources of her own adolescent low-self esteem legible, Richardson's book complements such topical



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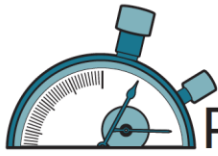
discussions of shame found in recent works like Melissa Harris Perry's *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Womanhood*. Moreover, *PHD to Ph.D.* contributes an extended narrative to the growing body of scholarship on Black girlhood and young Black womanhood found in the works of such scholars as Ruth Nicole Brown, Kyra Gaunt, Maisha Winn, Gwendolyn Pough and Carmen Kynard.

The remaining chapters spanning the time from her late adolescence to her late twenties constitute what we might see as her enrollment in—for a lack of a better term—a school of hard knocks. In such chapters as "The Rope," "Tricked Out," "Under the Big Top, I Mean the Big Time," "The Death of AC and the Birth of My Drug Habit," and "Slammin Cadillac Do's," Richardson takes readers deeper into her life at this time. She recounts the double life she lived as a teen prostitute and middle-school student and how she escaped her boyfriend/pimp and finished high school. She also describes her first attempt at college as well as the factors that caused her to eventually drop out of school and return to sex-work. Perhaps most sobering is her discussion of the years she spent working the streets of Cleveland and New York with violent pimps/lovers and the subsequent substance abuse addictions she developed. Although Richardson is adept in selecting the memories that paint a clear picture of the intersecting and systemic factors that make women vulnerable to these forms of exploitation, she tells her story in ways that open the door for deeper scholarly consideration. "Tricked Out," the book's fourth chapter, exemplifies the relationship between utilizing situated ways of knowing and self-preservation that runs throughout the book. By recalling the curriculum that other women working the streets taught her, Richardson pulls into our purview complex street literacies involving time ("Time Is Money".... "The first law

of ho-ing is git yo money first"), alliance-building ("you had to make friends with people on the street or at least not make enemies"), and the financial distinction of race ("If you look like a regla Black girl, you gone git regla Black money. I gets white girl money") that women have had to develop to survive these landscapes (65-68). Among other things, this aspect of *PHD to Ph.D.* invites scholars to think more deeply about the knowledge-making systems circulating in these street economies.

Richardson's interpersonal reflections on these years are a form of important critical work as well. For example, although the author makes mention of discovering that her parents reported her to law enforcement in the hopes that the jailing of their daughter would keep her safe as she worked the streets, the police are an inconsistent form of protection. In the ninth chapter, "Fools and Babies," Richardson's description of the sense of helplessness she experiences after a sexual and physical assault underscores the lack of protection from the state that some women of color feel: "Now what was I gonna do? I couldn't call the police because hoes can't be raped. From the perspective of the law, I am wrong"(156). The relevance of these confessions cannot be understated. As groups of women have recently used the hashtag #whyIstayed to discuss the kinds of entrapment that keep them in abusive domestic relationships, these sections on street-life in *PHD to Ph.D.* illuminate for us how institutional structures and hegemonic discourses uphold practices like sex trafficking and impact the lived realities of women of color.

Richardson seems to anticipate the skeptical audiences that may read this work and dismiss the levels of transparency in it, but, to her credit, she does not bow to them. An appeal to respectability politics this book is not. Instead,



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Richardson's memoir models how engaging in deep self-interrogation and reflective writing can produce frameworks for understanding the effects of a person's socialization. "Death Cycle," the book's tenth chapter, contains one of the most poignant examples of this practice as it opens with her describing how low-self esteem and shame rendered her "soul sick" (162). As she explains:

Ever since I was a little girl, bits of self-love had been creeping out of me daily. Mama and Daddy's big fight. Every time I got the message that "regla" Black girls weren't beautiful ... Yes, my family loved me, yes my parents were hard working people, yes they took me to church and taught me right from wrong. But that was never enough for any man of mine, and it wasn't enough for me. Instead of believing in who I was, I allowed myself to be defined by people, places and things. (162-163)

As readers might expect, Richardson's book leans towards the therapeutic, but even in the absence of an overtly pedagogical agenda, the book keeps one before us. In the context of Richardson's initial attempts at a college education, the term "soul sick" not only becomes a reminder of the many conditions that diminish students' sense of self-efficacy, but it also challenges us to consider what may be an outcome when educational spaces are unwelcoming. In this instance, Richardson draws our attention to a need for empathy and compassion that we should practice, particularly as writing and language instructors who may encounter the insecure students on similar journeys struggling to find themselves and make themselves at home in academia.

Correspondingly, the final three chapters focus on Richardson's navigation of the formal academy and the process of remaking her life. In

chapter twelve, "The Cleveland State University Years," she recalls the challenge of being a returning college freshman, single parent, and recovering addict. Readers looking for an argument that casts writing instruction or access to college as a simple cure for some of the adversities and struggles Richardson faced will be disappointed. While her description of the insensitive composition instructor who inquired about her high school before returning a paper with a low score and the writing tutors who relied on eradicationist techniques provide more evidence of the rationale behind the calls for more culturally sensitive and inclusive writing pedagogies African American language scholars and other groups continue to make, her narrative voice expands the argument. In response to one of her poorly-designed writing assignments, she writes: "I done been away from high school for six years, out in the world, conversing with doctors, lawyers, and men from all walks of life. I been using English (among other thangs) good enough to make hundreds of thousands of bucks and stay alive, and I need some square White folk to help me write about my hood? I don't think so" (196). As scholars like Aja Martinez are currently using counterstory as a critical narrative method to hold mirrors of accountability up to us as field, Richardson's book provides documentation of the pedagogical microaggressions occurring in these spaces. The question for writing and language instructors that emerges out of this section is one of ethics: Will we be gatekeepers or agents of access?

Some readers may offer the critique that the final chapter entitled "The Ph.D." where Richardson describes her life after earning her doctorate ends too abruptly in comparison to the in-depth discussions that she offers of the other landscapes she learns to navigate. Given the overall process of self-becoming she





narrates throughout this text, the work of this book is complete. In *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*, Richardson narrates the experiences of women in cultures of violence that are too rarely told. The power of this story, then, is that it models for scholars, educators, and readers seeking to be agents of access and change a way to make some sense and purpose out of pain.

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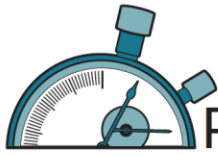
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