

Review:

Elaine Richardson. *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*. (Parlor Press, 2013)

Mariana Grohowski,
*Bowling Green State
University*

Shamefully, I was not familiar with Dr. Richardson's important work in African American and Hiphop literacies until I read her memoir *PHD to Ph.D.* In fourteen powerful chapters, Richardson unfolds her resolute history. The memoir is not like Richardson's other academic work, though it reveals an early engagement with language politics; it was her Mama's mission that she use "Propah Henglish" (4), and she was forced to "code-switch" in her speech and writing so teachers did not consider her "illiterate . . . for sounding Black" (202–7). In other words, Richardson's expertise on code-switching and language use is implicitly present as she illustrates how her past enveloped her, "in a struggle between what the rest of the world told me about myself, and the girl my family tried to raise" (163). It is also a strikingly raw piece of prose that vividly exposes her experiences and struggles moving from PHD ("po ho on dope: ex-prostitute, ex-drug addict, hood-dweller, baby mama of two 'illegitimate' children" (213)) to eventual English Ph.D. and tenured professor at The Ohio State University.

Richardson shares the various community literacies sponsored by parents, friends, and neighbors on 68th Street in Cleveland, Ohio and the lessons learned living a “double life” as both “Elaine, the school girl and Big Stuff, a ‘down ass chick’ in the making” (44). An observant and quick learner, Richardson recalls the methodologies she employed negotiating the discourses of her neighbors at the grocery store, on their porches, and of course, from more experienced street-workers as she learned “the ropes” as a novice prostitute.

Readers will come away perceiving Richardson not as an agentless victim but as one who learns best from lived experience. This is perhaps best illustrated through Richardson accounting of her drug addiction, funded from her earnings as a prostitute. As Richardson shares, “How do you explain to the police that you’re a prostitute that just wants her freedom to work the streets and support her habit? No matter what I said, I would be a no good woman getting what I deserved” (177). In fact, Richardson’s account as a prostitute advances what Jill McCracken might refer to as a “more realistic community representation” of “street [and] sex work” (13). Of course, unlike the discourse McCracken examines in newspaper articles about street workers, Richardson’s narrative offers a multidimensional, lived experience and avoids rhetorics of victimization, powerlessness, and systemic blaming of the world of prostitution. In essence, Richardson’s memoir proves that sometimes the only way to find one’s self is to lose one’s self, thereby exemplifying through her lived experiences that one is solely responsible for one’s destiny. As Richardson puts it: “It’s like qualities that we need to live are the same ones that can kill” (190). Thus, Richardson’s message suggests the immense power of individual responsibility against larger social systems (like race) for personal and social change, thereby advancing the rhetorical prowess of citizen rhetors for enacting local and global revolutions.

As a graduate student myself, I took particular interest in the ways in which Richardson conveyed the challenges and norms of academia in the last two chapters of her book. Though Richardson writes with a broader, less academic audience in mind, I found her advice about mentorship and navigating through academia as a student and junior faculty member refreshing, compared to Gregory Colón

Semenza's Graduate Study for the 21st Century. I found Richardson's no-nonsense approach helpful; for example, Richardson attests, "In the world of what they call Research One University, your value is based on your ability to . . . [produce]. . . nobody cares about your personal struggles" (244). Yet, Richardson's book is not meant as a how-to guide on professional development for graduate students; instead, Richardson's work is about embracing not hiding who we are and where we come from. Whereas Semenza argues that to develop professionally, academics must deny their personal lives, Richardson's memoir as a whole demonstrates that realistically, professional development demands the acknowledgement and incorporation of the various community literacies that surround us—within and beyond the academy. Though Richardson echoes Semenza's testimony that academia is not for the faint of heart, Richardson exemplifies that surviving and thriving in academia is not nearly as hard as trying to make a life for one's self (and one's daughters) on the street.

There are at least two important insights that Richardson offers writing studies teacher-scholars in her memoir:

1. Like the 1974 National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) "Resolution on the Student's Right to Their Own Language," Richardson attests that she was taught by her writing teachers and tutors to be ashamed of her language, often grappling with their labeling her "illiterate" for not easily adapting to "academese." Thus, Richardson posits that writing instructors should encourage our students "to feel good about [their] language or value it," in order for our students to, "feel good about [them]selves. Your language is your heart, your brain, your family, your history" (210-1). In short, I see Richardson advocating for a renewed commitment to the NCTE's "Resolution on the Student's Right to Their Own Language," stressing that perhaps instructors of writing would better assist students if they focused on higher-order concerns such as, "how to write with power, to develop [one's] voice, to analyze arguments, to become a critical thinker," rather than focusing on lower-order concerns such as "'cleaning up' [student's] grammar" (210). Such efforts are particularly possible for those interested in curricula that engage students' or community partner's discourses. In fact, a poignant example of a service learning assignment that enacts

Richardson's advice is Shirley Faulkner-Springfield's Reflections article "Letters to Young High School Students. Furthermore, Richardson's advancement in encouraging language rights might be of interest for community learners and writers as well that negotiate "propah English" and "code switching" in their literate lives.

2. Additionally, Richardson advances the argument that as teacher-scholars of writing, we could do better to acknowledge the needs, abilities, and experiences our students bring with them into our writing classrooms. In fact, Richardson's life work exemplifies how one's experiences and abilities can be embraced and utilized in educational and professional endeavors. As Richardson puts it: "Language, culture and history. We separate these to teach writing and language but they are not really that easy to untangle" (223). Thus, as readers of this journal know from first-hand experience, through curricula and assignments that engage reflective, contemplative writing for civic engagement and service learning projects, students are better able to acknowledge links between language, culture, and history in ways the five-paragraph essay ignores.

PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life offers scholars, teachers, and students of public writing, civic engagement, and service learning hope and inspiration for overcoming adversity by the sure will to live and the hunger for knowledge and the need to embrace all aspects of one's identity by uniting personal and professional literacies.

WORKS CITED

- Faulkner-Springfield, Shirley E. "Letters to Young High School Students: Writing and Uniting an Academic Community." *Reflections* 10.2 (2011): 63–107. Print.
- McCracken, Jill. "Street and Sex Work: Re/Constructing Discourse from Margin to Center." *Community Literacy Journal* 4.2 (2010): 1–17. Print.
- Students' Right to Their Own Language. Committee on CCCC Language Statements. *College Composition and Communication* 25.3 (1974). Print.
- Semenza, Gregory M. Colón. *Graduate Study for the 21st Century: How to Build an Academic Career in the Humanities*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010. Print.