

Phd to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life

Elaine B. Richardson

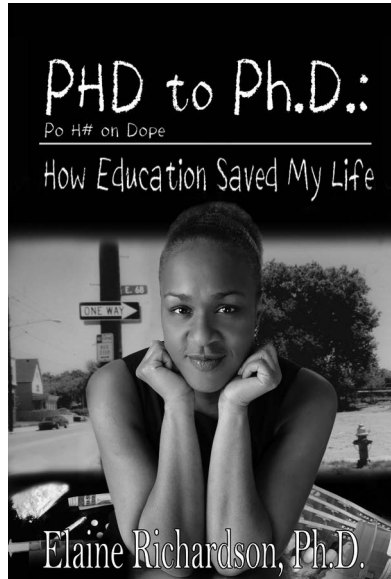
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Reviewed by Cynthia Delaney

Michigan Technological University

In *PHD (Po Ho on Dope) to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*, Elaine Richardson successfully establishes a deeply personal narrative that has the potential to reach and inspire a variety of audiences both inside and outside of the academy and serves as a model of the public scholarship in the spirit of other widely influential literacy narratives, such as those by Mike Rose and Victor Villanueva. Through discussion of her own journey, Richardson's memoir is an unflinching presentation of her early life on the streets, and an unabashed celebration of literacy and education as her redemption. While literacy researchers may be hesitant of Richardson's treatment of education as a panacea (or what Harvey Graff might call the "literacy myth"), Richardson stresses the importance of "end[ing] the lie that Black people have no intellectually worthy language and literacy traditions, that English and literacy are the same across different people and cultures, and that upper class biased Whites in power and their followers (not all White people) get to define language and literacy for everyone else" (235). Richardson's argument has important implications for readers in and out of the academy by encouraging the development of a stronger examination of "teachings and mindsets that are not to our advantage" (235) and the realization, particularly for members of disadvantaged communities, that it is possible to make contributions to "culture and to the world of ideas" through challenging the paradigms and finding power in language (236).

In short, the book details Richardson's journey as a young African American female who transcends "cultural performance" and socially enforced expectations that she perform the identity of a "regla" African American girl: that is, someone who was supposed to be sexually available and readily accepting of physical abuse. Enacting this prescribed identity in her youth, Richardson's experiences with prostitution and drug addiction capture the destructive feelings of guilt and shame tied up in this identity.



As a testament to the fluidity of identity, however, Richardson also illustrates that, by means of education and the support systems (such as her mother's strength and support) on reserve for her, Richardson rewrote her sense of self within the academy, conducting research that would not only assist in her finding her voice but love for herself and self-confidence.

Beginning with her family history, Richardson establishes her roots as a good student in search of self-acceptance in the wrong places. As a preteen and teenager, she has periods of consistency in school but she lives a "double life" (periodically lending more importance to one life over the other) by simultaneously attending college and working as a prostitute, up until she is academically dismissed from Cleveland State and becomes completely immersed in "the life of street people" (110). Richardson spends a fair portion of the book discussing her history as a prostitute and details the characteristics of the men who serve as her pimps and abusers in the years before she goes back to college. Although Richardson's life falls into despair and she loses her sense of self, she realizes, after some years, having two children, and narrowly missing death several times, that she "needed to love and feel good about [herself] again" (190). When she is accepted again into Cleveland State University to finish her undergraduate degree, she "put[s her] all into school" (194) and nothing deters her from her mission to succeed as a student. In describing her years as a student and then graduate student, she places emphasis on finding her niche as a scholar and how finding her educational passion and support system drives her to continue on and receive her Ph.D.

In addition to its candor about Richardson's conflicted history, the book is notable for the lengths to which Richardson goes "to be true to the languages of her communities" (vii-viii). Richardson carefully represents the diverse voices of the people (be they pimps, boyfriends, often a combination of both) from her past. The strongest voice in the narrative is that of her mother, whose Jamaican accent Richardson captures in phonetic spellings, and who stands as a huge support system for pursuit of educational "oppachunity" (73) and does not abandon her through her years of addiction and prostitution. In this way, Richardson's book stays true to her communities and embodies its arguments for the importance of acknowledging and incorporating the diversity of languages that appear in classrooms and literacy workshops. As she writes, "If you don't feel good about your language or value it, you can't possibly feel good about yourself. Your language is your heart, your brain, your family, your history" (210-11).

An immersive read, the book presents Richardson engaged in conversation with readers about her personal journey through hardship and how she ultimately found self-acceptance through gaining an education and transcending self-made and societal boundaries. Accessible and poignant, Richardson's memoir would benefit undergraduate students as well as members of disadvantaged communities outside of higher education. She does not withhold details and her use of language and tone create a sense of immediacy. As she begins finding a sense of pride in herself, she realizes that there is strength in her voice as a Black woman and that she is not alone, "We weren't illiterate as the prof and tutors made us out to be. They just didn't have a clue about

Black folks. And they didn't see who we were or where we came from as an important part of the educational process" (201).

Richardson's work answers Jacqueline Jones Royster's 1996 call in "When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own" to strive "toward a clearer respect for human potential and achievement from whatever their source and a clearer understanding that voicing at its best is not just well-spoken but also well-heard" (40). While repeating the mantra, "Don't let them kill your voice" (207) (where "they" include unsupportive professors and an oppressive educational system) Richardson applied her life and experiences to fuel her desire and passion to complete her research on "Black language [which is most certainly] a part of African American culture" (211). Richardson's work serves as a concrete example of learning to use the power of language and narrative to create meaningful research to inspire others to follow similar paths. Because education gave her a hope and a purpose, she allowed education the power to save her life.

At first glance Richardson's bold assessment of her history is that, "where there's a will, there is always a way" (196) may seem to emphasize the individual who lifts herself up by her bootstraps. While Richardson's claim may sound naïve here, she does not blame the "will" of individuals who have not found a "way," but instead acknowledges that, through the combination of support from various systems and her "die trying" (194) attitude, she was able to achieve in her pursuit of education. Although support systems do not arise for everyone and serve everyone, Richardson's work initiates dialogue about how to remedy an unwanted life situation and strive for something greater, starting with a sense of purpose and building self-worth. In the book, Richardson marks her transition from self-loathing to the shedding of internalized shame. She notes, "I am who I am. I never wanted to put on airs and make myself out to be someone who I wasn't. I'm a girl from down the way, an ex-junkie, ex-ho, a baby mama, and I'm still just as good as anybody else on this planet" (239). Community literacy practitioners and researchers will find this book useful for examining the multiple and complex obstacles and support networks that operate to enable and constrain the sharing of stories of struggle and achievement.