



Emerging Scholars Organization (ESO)
An Affiliate of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature

Spotlight on Southernist Scholars Initiative

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1. How did you become involved in southern studies? Did you enter graduate school knowing exactly what you wanted to study, or did you come into the field during your Ph.D. program or afterward?

My dissertation topic eventually led me to the field of Southern studies. I seriously began to formulate my research project after my preliminary exams in 1996. A professor in my department gave me the advice to focus on a set of questions that I would not mind journeying with for the next few years and keeping me awake at night. I realized that if I was going to be able to put my heart and mind fully into the project, then I'd have to feel connected to it and truly passionate about it. I wanted to develop the kind of project that I would have at least some "clairvoyance" about, to invoke the word I used back then, as opposed to one that would make me feel like too much of a fish out of water. My earliest work revolved around analysis of Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play*, a work set in a fictive town in Louisiana and that was by an author born in Philadelphia, which perfectly illustrated the cultural politics that I was interested in investigating. These characteristics of the play pushed me to begin to formulate very different kinds of critical questions about the region, and toward a very different archive for studying it. My trajectory of inquiry led me to study the "dirty South" rap movement eventually. It came up in a footnote in the dissertation but became a chapter in the book. I am thankful to have been in the kind of department in which my professors encouraged me to explore intellectual questions

that genuinely interested and excited me. I had long been fascinated with politics of exclusion based on region in the African American context and wanted to gain a better understanding of them, which is what my dissertation project enabled me to do. Back then, the perspectives in Southern literature and Southern history were my primary critical resources. In 1997, as a graduate student visiting England for the first time to attend the Mapping African American Conference sponsored by the Collegium for African American Research in Liverpool (CAAR), I was very excited to meet some other black women graduate students coming from Texas who worked on the “Black South (West)” and, like me, were grappling with the role of geography in constructing black identity. We were amazed that every one of us had zoned in on the same passages by Paul Gilroy and Carole Boyce-Davies in Small Acts (1993) and Black Women, Writing and Identity (1994), respectively, in thinking about the relationship of the South to the larger African diaspora and deconstructing the African American category. Karla Frye was also part the rich dialogues that we had there. She was organizing a conference on the “black South” as part of the faculty at the University of Alabama, and I participated in this landmark event later that year. A few years later, at the 2000 MLA, the two panels on which I presented were also in the field and opened the door to meeting a larger community of Southernist scholars.

2. What is the most rewarding aspect of your current position? What is the most challenging, or what has been surprising? (For example, do you spend a lot of time doing something that you did not anticipate doing when you were a student?)

My first job in the University of California system, which is where I spent the first decade of my career (1998-2008), was a wonderful seasoning ground in the profession and a great blessing. It provided excellent training and is part of why I am a very conscientious scholar with a strong sense of professionalism. When I first arrived in my current department at Cornell in 2008, I described it by saying that “It took my experience of my field [in this case, African American literature] from two to three dimensions.” In other words, it was interesting to be in a place with programming that took the field beyond typical textbook descriptions by staging visceral encounters with its subjects in some instances. I was amazed by how exponentially those encounters increased, though I was no longer in an English department. Within the first month on my job, when Angela Davis was my department’s scholar-in-residence, I could not believe that I was out to a dinner that included her, Manthia Diawara and Carole Boyce-Davies. A major hip hop conference was held that brought ten veteran artists in the field to campus to dialogue with students, as well as a distinguished panel of hip hop scholars. Similarly, a jazz symposium was spearheaded by Brent Edwards that brought artists and jazz musicians from the 1970s Soho scene to campus, from Sam Rivers to Fred Brown. There was a conference on James Baldwin. There was such a barrage of talent coming through that every day felt like Christmas in the beginning. I literally could not wait for the sun to come up daily so that I could get to the department, even though I was on leave during my first semester. Before I left California, I’d begun to experiment pedagogically with what I thought of as “dynamic teaching,” and such encounters created more opportunities for it, by extending teaching and learning opportunities beyond the classroom. I coordinated my department’s colloquium for two years in part because I was so fascinated with the rich programming and wanted to understand how it happened. I have found that my professional network has expanded exponentially as a result of meeting so many

wonderful scholars since I've come here through our job searches and other events, as well as through encounters at conferences and in social media. In general, it has been useful to teach my field from a more interdisciplinary perspective, and to also engage work across disciplines in teaching courses such as Introduction to Africana Studies. I did not know a lot about that area before I came here, which examines Africa and its diasporas from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. I feel that being in an interdisciplinary department has refined my sense of what it means to be a humanist and expanded my knowledge in a range of other disciplines, including the social sciences. I think that it was interesting to come here and encounter what I described as a more "intimate classroom," in the sense of smaller class sizes in some instances. I had gotten very used to the lecture format, and it was typical for me to teach large numbers of students, like groups of 60 to 80, even in a field such as African American literature. But I had just five students in my first African American literature course here.

3. What classes do you typically teach (undergraduate and / or graduate)? Which classes do you enjoy teaching the most?

I did not have opportunities to teach many lower-division courses on my first job, and never taught freshmen at all. Here at Cornell, I have enjoyed teaching first-year students in a First-Year Writing Seminar that I developed entitled The African American Short Story, which may enroll up to eighteen students. Students are required to write at least six papers on which they receive detailed feedback, and have opportunities to revise several of them. Instructors must hold a minimum of two half-hour conferences with them to discuss their writing portfolios. Sometimes, in addition to the standard papers, I have also given them the option to produce their own short story. Within a semester, the grading is intensive and entails fast turnarounds. This is one of the best new courses that I have designed and introduced since my arrival here. Last year, a new course that I designed primarily for graduate students is New Black Southern Women Writers, which focuses on this genre's development in the new millennium and allowed me to teach the work of a range of writers, from a novel of Tayari Jones to poems of Honorée Jeffers. I also love my Toni Morrison's Novels seminar, which is a combination graduate/undergraduate seminar. Most recently, I offered it this past spring. The diverse group of students who enrolled came from fields on campus from communications to government, as well as English, and made it a "home" from the very first day. On their own, they developed a snack list and brought refreshments to class for every session, and I sponsored two pizza parties along the way. The community that they built among themselves for the journey through Morrison's novel repertoire was deeply inspiring. It was really touching when one of the students sent me this note about her experience in the course: "Dear Professor Richardson, I just want you to know that I really love your class; as a result, Wednesdays have become my favorite day of the week! My love for Morrison just continues to grow as I read and re-read her amazing novels, and I am so glad to now be learning so much more of the background and themes that I had not noticed or learned of before." I gained a lot of experience through my years of lecturing in the classroom in UC and became a very confident one, but feel even more at ease, excited, and self-possessed in my teaching these days. I prefer solitude and am more of an introvert. So the challenge of putting myself out there in the classroom in ways that are counter-intuitive to who I am is always interesting. I always set the bar high with the determination to be my best.

4. Why do you think southern studies is useful to students and professors outside of the field?

As a co-editor of the New Southern Studies book series at the University of Georgia Press, I've often described it as an indispensable critical "tool box" in the field and as being useful to "think with." I feel that way about Southern studies, too. There is so much ingenuity in the field, and I am also inspired by the work of a lot of newer scholars who are choosing to focus their work in the area. I feel that the clarity and depth of thinking about the U.S. South in the field is not just valuable in an academic sense, but also indispensable for a range of public dialogues. In my mind, Southernist scholars are the most ideal and reliable thought leaders on Southern questions because they tend to do the most grounded and consistent research on this area. I think that their perspectives need to be sought out more frequently than they are in some instances, including in the media. In the most ideal academic world, more people would realize that Southern studies is for everybody. Some things are changing, but the persisting "urban bias" that can inflect some public dialogues does not help anyone. In June of 2015, in the wake of the Charleston tragedy at Mother Emanuel Methodist Church, it was not only clear that religious studies needs to be more saliently integrated into areas such as black and Africana studies, but the need for more expansive, nuanced and complex epistemologies of the U.S. South in national dialogues was also clear. I want to see the work of Southern studies cited with the intellectual fairness and generosity that scholars in this field take up and acknowledge other work that is relevant to their arguments. I won't mention any specific examples, but will admit that in some cases, I am weary of seeing scholars in some disciplines act as if they are pioneering intellectual arguments and discoveries that were in some cases, made in Southern studies ages ago.

5. What is the best advice that you received about the job market? Or what is the advice that you most frequently or emphatically give to your graduate students on the market or to your undergraduate students who want to pursue a Ph.D.?

One of my mentors, Cathy Davidson, discourages job candidates from writing "cookie cutter" letters and urges them to "translate" what makes them "original" as scholars. Hers is some of the top advice that I have always followed in my career. Another mentor, Nahum Chandler, always encouraged his students to frame their dissertation in relation to a larger set of research questions in which they hope to be invested over time, in the "dissertation paragraph" of the job letter, instead of simply describing the dissertation. In other words, he advised them not to reductively conflate their intellectual identity with the dissertation. A project developed ten years later and long after the dissertation's completion would ideally plug into that first sentence of the job letter that enunciates one's over-arching research questions, and as the dissertation/book paragraph begins. The sentence sounds like this for me: "My scholarly project has consistently engaged two questions, the status of the South in the United States in shaping race and gender in this nation, and the status of the region in shaping categories such as the African American and the American, as well as masculine and feminine formations. Increasingly, I have also examined the global and Hemispheric impact of the U.S. South." The advice that I always give job candidates myself begins with suggesting that they not use the phrase "on the market," which I do not like

the sound of. I prefer “going up for jobs,” or anything that affirms more of a sense of choice and agency in the candidate. I urge job candidates to take the development of the dossier very seriously and remind them that “form is key,” and to be sure to cultivate their best and most beautiful “forms” in terms of writing the job letter, dissertation abstract, etc. When it comes down to it, there are free points in perfecting them. I help job candidates to make the process more manageable in their minds by reminding them to remember the purpose of each stage of the process, what its main goal is and the door that it ideally opens. I urge them to focus on that goal, as opposed to worrying too much about the end result of the entire process or thinking about the process in too comprehensive a sense, which can be intimidating. I help them relate the dossier to the concrete goal of securing an interview. If one stands at the bottom of a staircase and looks at the top stair, getting to it can feel impossible, but taking the smaller steps along the way makes the process of getting there a lot more manageable. I think the other important thing is to remind students to heed the advice of their advisors and placement committees, who typically want the best for them. To me, it is always useful to help job candidates get into a certain mindset, definitely a more confident one. Last fall, when I was on sabbatical, I met for about five hours with a post-doc on campus who was gearing up to apply for jobs. I went over her dossier with her line by line, beginning with the job letter, and explained why the changes I suggested were necessary. I helped to demystify various aspects of the process in light of the experiences that I have gained over the years as a job candidate, job search chair and member of numerous search committees, and outlined tips for interviewing and approaching various stages of the process. At MLA, I was happy when she told me that she’d been invited on six campus visits. After she was hired, we also met for lunch and I advised her on making the transition into the profession, outlining various strategies for teaching, developing her research and relating to her new colleagues. I love this topic and have also talked about it by giving talks on various aspects of professionalization over the years, 23 so far in all. In the job application process, the key, really, is remembering who you are and have always been, even long before graduate school began. Remember and feel empowered by all that you have ever been along the way, and by the people who have loved you along the way and who really matter most in your life. What you bring is valuable. Jobs are nice, but they are not everything. They do not define you (i.e. having one or not having one). You have worth no matter what, and you are truly “the catch” in the process. One must never idolize institutions. Whatever the outcomes, you must still be who you are and must never question your worth as a person.

6. In addition to your tremendous contribution to the field of southern studies, you are also an accomplished artist. How do you see the relationship between your academic work and your work as an artist?

I have tended to think of my art and academic work in separate compartments but the relationship has become clearer over time. I was always into making crafts as a child, but made my first art quilt as a senior in college, and continued to make them once I got to graduate school. I stopped my quilt work altogether, though, once I began to prepare for my prelims. As I was preparing to go to my job in California, I felt regretful, exclaiming to myself that “I have lost two whole years in developing my art discourse!” “There’s a time gap that I can never get back now!” I went to California determined not to ever drop the ball again, and vowed that I would

always ensure that I made time to keep up my productivity as an artist as well. I had done the “Bible in a Year” reading the year after my prelims, which took me two hours after church every Sunday afternoon for a year to complete, evenings that I also spent watching various sermons and concluded by writing in my “professional prayer journal.” I had the habit of setting aside those two hours and in California, began to fill them by working on my art, for under ordinary circumstances, I typically don’t do any of my academic work on Sundays. In my early years, it was inspiring to hear Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott comment that “When I wake up, I never know whether I will paint or write,” which helped me to envision what coming to a day might look like when I no longer will have to choose either, though for now, writing is what I must prioritize. It helped that I was in a department with a viable creative subculture of people who moonlighted as poets, photographers and artists in some cases. I find that I address similar questions in my art that I address in my academic work but for very different audiences. People who may never read my writing can get a sense of my ideas by attending my exhibitions. It has been useful that my art has reinforced and extended the public outreach that I am able to do as a scholar. One of the most interesting and inspiring projects along these lines this year was having a program developed around my work as an artist and academic at a Wall Street investment bank, an engagement at which I was delighted to both speak briefly and participate in a dialogue with a former student, which was a great success and got a lot of wonderful responses. I was also sought out because of some of my research-in-progress for purposes of market research. I am enjoying and learning a lot from the challenge of speaking to different kinds of audiences. I am finding that such encounters draw on not just my art or academic perspectives per se, as much as my totality of professional and life experiences in general. In 2013, I was invited to be the speaker at Montgomery’s gala 100th birthday celebration for Rosa Parks. In 2015, it was an honor to help launch the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March and the 60th anniversary of the Montgomery Bus Boycott with my second solo exhibition of 60 art quilts at the Rosa Parks Museum (www.richerichardson.com). Most recently, I was deeply inspired to speak at the Westheimer Peace Symposium at Wilmington College and to also contribute a panel to their community quilt in honor of John Crawford, the young African American man whose life was taken by police violence at an Ohio Walmart in August of 2014.