

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Hello everyone. This is Academically Speaking with Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry, Vice Provost and Dean of the College of Undergraduate Studies, here at the University of Central Florida. And with me this afternoon is my esteemed colleague, Dr. Leah Gaines. Dr. Gaines joined the University of Central Florida in fall of 2021 and as a lecturer in the Interdisciplinary Studies program. Dr. Gaines holds a Ph.D. in African American and Africana Studies, with a concentration in urban education from Michigan State University. She received a master's degree from Morgan State University, where she studied history and African American Studies. She completed her undergraduate studies at Towson University, where she majored in psychology and minored in African American Studies. Her research interests are in structural inequities, urban education, student experiences, African American language, black woman and beauty, race, and identity. Her latest publication, *In the Midst of the Water Crisis: Language and Resistance in Flint*, is an ethnographic work that examines language and resistance in Flint and how the educational community in Flint, Michigan has used language to resist the ongoing water crisis. Welcome Dr. Gaines.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Thank you, Dr. Berry.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

It's a pleasure to have you join us today at Academically Speaking. And so, we're gonna start out by just having the audience get to know a little bit about you. Tell us about your background, the things that you studied, and what led you to deciding, "I want to know more about this."

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Okay, so I started my collegiate studies at Towson University, where I was a psychology major. So, I actually thought that I wanted to do something in the psychology field, where I'm from Towson University is right across the street from a psych hospital, called Sheppard Pratt Hospital. And most of the psych majors tend to graduate from Towson, and then go right across the street and work there at Sheppard Pratt and that's what I did. So, I was working there for a few years. And I realized working in a hospital was not a passion of mine. Even from down to the superficial things like having to work on holidays. My family, we like to celebrate holidays together. So, I wasn't sure that that's what I wanted to do forever. So, then I went back to school, I went down the street to Morgan State University. and that is when I kind of got into a passion of history. So, I studied history there and although I've always loved learning and teaching, I didn't know that I loved to research until I got into my doctoral program. So, my mom's a teacher, my brother is sort of in --my brother used to teach, but now he works at the Smithsonian, the African American History and Culture Museum in DC. So, it's kind of like a thing in our family, so like, to stay in education. But once I, when I was at Morgan, actually, I worked at an elementary school in Baltimore City. And, I grew up in Maryland, but not in Baltimore. I grew up in Howard County, Maryland, which is about 45 minutes or an hour away. And so, my experiences in Howard County, about an hour away, were

drastically different than what I saw in Baltimore City. And I wanted to know why this difference was.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

So, that's what got me into research. Right. So, for my dissertation, I actually looked at structural inequities within education in Baltimore City, and I returned to the school that I worked at during my master's degree.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

So, that's kind of how I got into education and research.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

So, the lesson to be learned there is to follow your passion.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Well, that's important because I think lots of college students think they are doing things that they're supposed to do as opposed to doing the things that they get excited about. And in your current role, you get to do the thing that you're excited about, but then pass along that passion. So, tell us a little bit about your research since you have found your passion and research.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Yeah. So, I love everything about history. I love everything about experiences. I love everything about culture. So, I'll kind of transition a little bit back and then come forward. So, when I was in Baltimore, the thing that stood out to me the most were, as soon as you walked into this specific Elementary School, the first thing I saw --and I'm sure most people see when they come in, but the difference is it was not a surprise to people, because they often see it versus me who did not always see it --were these signs above the water, that says "Do not drink," right "Hand Washing Only," right? So, it's because of the lead issue, in the school and that in a lot of homes and communities in Baltimore. So, trying to understand why that is here. Why this? Why this lead problem is a norm here in many schools, but not an hour away in other schools, right. So specifically, how come certain students have these experiences and others don't? And I was also interested in understanding why people weren't upset about it. Nobody was as upset about it as I was, meaning the people in the school were kind of just like, "Yeah, you know, that's just what it is. It's just how it is." I wanted to better understand these things, right? So, Baltimore being a very older city, they have these issues with lead because of

the paint that is used on the water pipes. Which is fine, but the problem is, is that it hasn't been fixed, or changed or updated, right. And so, these problems exist and the real issue, though, is that it causes lead poisoning, especially for children, whose bodies are still developing. And I can be kind of a pessimist, so one thing that kept me excited about research instead of just understanding the problem, but also understanding how are people resisting this issue? And how are people? Yes, this is a huge issue. But how are people surviving within it? Right? How are people living? I'm the only one that's angry. So, how are y'all walking around okay and happy? Tell me how. So, that's what I was, I was trying to understand. Now, I research anything that has to do with history, cultures and experiences, lived experiences of people of color, Maryland, Michigan, Florida, wherever the people are, is where I am. And that is kind of easiest, because then I have access to interview people. And those are places that I have lived. Did that answer the question?

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. So, it really helps us to also understand that there is no type for research, right? So, oftentimes, young children, when they get asked to draw a picture, or to describe what a researcher looks like, they usually come up with the person that most resembles Albert Einstein in a lab coat. I remember I had the privilege of participating and the opportunity to do a brief video clip where we were talking about what a researcher looks like, and had the opportunity to be able to tell folks, you know, I'm a researcher, I'm an active researcher, I also do ethnographic research, auto ethnographic research, Phenomenological Research, which is to sort of understand why a phenomenon exists, such as the issue with the lead paint in schools, and narrative research, researched, it tells a story about a particular phenomenon so that we can really sort of understand how people engage with certain kinds of circumstances. And also, for me, at least, it provides opportunities for problem solving, you know, sort of solving the mystery. I've read a lot of Nancy Drew novels when I was a kid so I like solving the mystery, right? So, we have lots of people who may not necessarily in this 21st century look like your run of the mill garden variety, ordinary, stereotypical researcher, right? So, I think it's important that you do this work and it's you're able to sort of unearth all of this new information and to help people engage in problem solving.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

And Dr. Berry, I'll say, I've been very lucky in that along the way, I've been able to see people who look like me. So, my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Lena Ampadu at Towson University, a black woman who looked like me. When I went on to my master's, the chair for my for my thesis, Dr. Debra Newman Ham was a woman who looked like me. When I went on to Michigan State University. I got taken under the wing of Dr. Terah Chambers, a woman who looked like me. So, I haven't I will say that I feel very lucky to have been able to follow the path behind people that have been, one willing to help me, and also willing to guide me and teach me. Be patient, I'm sure undergraduate Leah was not as easy to work with. So, and I'm betting,

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

That would be the case for many of us.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

When I think about it, I'm probably I feel embarrassed, like, Dr. Ampadu was I really, really bad and not bad as in like, acting, but bad is in terms of in undergraduate, I was very passionate, and I wanted to learn, but I also felt so --I felt like the younger people on campus were just, "we want change now." and you know, other people were trying to guide me and tell me better, you know. And so, I just feel very proud to have been able to see people who look like me and show me how to do it as well.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

And that's significantly important as we think about our, our history as black women as women of color, and how so many individuals have been able to contribute in relationship to their research, there's scholarship, teaching in the classroom, contributing to communities, contributing to science and engineering and all kinds of fields, right? So, as we think about and reflect on all of the people who have really contributed to what we know in U.S. context, everything from who invented the streetlight to who invented the broom of all things, the modern day broom. Why do you think Black History Month is so important? In the context of all of that.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

I think it is important because historically, we have not always been able to prioritize different experiences in different cultures or different understandings. And I think that taking out a month, within a year to say: although we don't prioritize this culture, this history, this experience throughout the year, we are going to make it a duty to do it this month and I think that's extremely important. I think that's important for the students and the people that you mentioned, that don't have the people that look like them, that can say, well, these people have done these amazing things and they look just like you. So, I think that that month is carved out for that. And I think that we should be able to celebrate histories, colors and experiences of black people and their contributions to society. When I was in middle school, I was in this program called Black Saga and the organizer would always say --this was a middle school system some time ago, but his name was either Dr. Charles Christian or Dr. Christian Charles and he was a professor at University of Maryland College Park at the time --and he would say, "It's Black Saga time. Black history is American history," and I loved hearing it. Every year at the competition, he would say that. And I think that's important for people to hear, too, because I think some people think that it is only the history of a group of people, but if we're talking about Black American history, this group of people are also Americans is all of our history.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Absolutel and they contributed to American society, not just to black people. And so, you know, it's it's funny that you should say that because one of my former mentors, the late Dr. William H. Watkins, wrote in what we call the curriculum Bible, because I'm a curriculum theorists by training. The text is called Understanding Curriculum. And he writes in there that the history of black people is inextricably tied to the history of all people. And when we think about all of the contributions that many black people made

in U.S. context, they contributed to American society, not just to a small group of people and their particular way of life, which, by the way, is not monolithic because black people are just as diverse as every other group of people in relationship to how we engage. And so, when we think about all of those things, one of the things that I felt was really important about what you said was how a variety of different people really impacted on your trajectory, your journey as an academic and as a researcher. But let's talk about your teaching. So, as I mentioned earlier, you teach in the Interdisciplinary Studies program, and my first question in relationship to that is why do you teach?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

I teach because I love learning myself, which sounds silly or people might think, "Oh, you love learning?" Yes. I am a person who even in my older age/retirement, I think I will be one of those people who take classes until I can't anymore. I think that it helps me to grow professionally. It develops my skills, it develops my students, I love mentoring, I love working with people, and then I also like being able to be that person. I just named three people that I felt that I feel kind of molded, my work, the person that I was the student, and I want to be able to be that person for somebody else. So, I think that's important as well. Within IDS, I teach a few classes, the standard classes that we all kind of take turns teaching are the cornerstone and the capstone. And, those those classes, kind of mold IDS students. So, a lot of times we get students who have come from different areas, and they're kind of learning to be an IDS major. And that helps them to one understand what IDS is, and then also how they can use that to apply that to their studies, as well as who they want to be after they graduate, or who they want to be as, as they're still a student, but specifically to prepare them for life after graduation, right. The class that I get emails about every day, the one that they are so excited about is the Study Away. I was just speaking with Barbara, and we were talking about how the program has been growing. So, I get more students that are more excited every semester, right. And I'm, I'm excited to see this course evolve, right? Because one I get to learn with the students. When I teach, although I'm the person that is teaching, I'm also learning, right? So, am I able to continue talking about the Study Away, is that okay?

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Oh, sure! That was my next question anyway.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

So, the Study Away is essentially a course that allows students to learn outside of the classroom, right? In a different area, culture, city, state. In the past, I've done a study away to St. Augustine, Florida. I've also done a study away to New Orleans, Louisiana. And within those classes, we researched the history and the experiences of a marginalized group. And I had an idea of what I wanted the students to do, but they had their own ideas coming in. And I was okay with that. So, they kind of ran with that too. Because it is an IDS course the students come from different areas of knowledge, background, and interest. So, what they do is they take their specific knowledge and interest and they research that marginalized group from that experience.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**  
Which makes it interdisciplinary.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**  
Exactly, or from those disciplines rather multiple. And I get off topic here.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**  
Study Away...

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**  
Okay, so, yeah, so this summer, I'm really excited to be taking students to Puerto Rico. Here, we will be studying the history, cultures, and experiences of Black and Latinx groups within Puerto Rico. We will be doing a service project with a local community and we will be working with a student organization on a campus in Puerto Rico as well, which I'm excited about. So, I'm still in the in the planning stage of this, of this course. And I meet with some of the campus organizers in Puerto Rico next month, actually, and so we'll finalize everything then. But so far, the class is full, we have a waitlist, and students are extremely, extremely excited about it.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**  
And it's certainly an opportunity to really understand the interdisciplinary nature of research in different contexts. So, just as you've had the opportunity to do research in Maryland, in Michigan, and now in Florida, you could literally use the same topic in relationship to that, but because the context and the space and the people are different, some of their issues in relationship to that topic may look very different, right. So, now we have students who have the opportunity to engage in the very same way, thinking about the thing that they want to know most about, whether it's water safety, or language learning, or whatever the case may be, and position that topic in that space. And really learn more about: what does it mean to do research on a particular topic outside of the space that I normally would do that in? Would I find out something differently? So, that's super exciting.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**  
And I'm also excited to that we are able to provide this opportunity to students who might not have had the opportunity outside of this course. So, most of my students who went to New Orleans last summer, this was our first time on a plane, right?

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**  
Oh, wow.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**  
So, being able to experience a culture, and culture outside of just people --food, space, everything --was different, right. And it was a learning experience in itself, just getting on that plane was a learning experience. Right. So, that's exciting. And actually, the first time I traveled out of the country was when I was an undergrad. So, although we're not leaving the country, I still think that using school as an opportunity to learn even outside

of the classroom is very important. And I'm excited that I'm able to get these opportunities to students.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

It's a different kind of cultural space. And so, even within the state of Florida, there are different cultural spaces. So imagine how people in Appalachia or in California or in Texas, or in Portland, Oregon, engage in their spaces differently, because the weather is different, the languages are new, some languages are different, the food is different. So, all of those things are learning experiences by themselves. Set aside from the research students are engaging in

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Absolutely.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Well we're super excited that you're leading our Study Away program in the College of Undergraduate Studies. And it's one of many things that you are involved in, on campus and off campus. So, tell us a little about the organizations that you're engaged in, inside of the university space, and outside of the university space.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Okay. So at UCF, I am a member and executive board member for BFSA, Black Faculty and Staff Association. And within this organization, I serve as the membership co chair, well, one of the membership co chairs, I'm a membership co chair for faculty. So, essentially what I do as I try to get faculty to stay members, paid members. So, more than just a membership, but a paid member in terms of commitment and then also recruit faculty to become members as well. And what be BFSA does is we have different workshops, different meetings, and different resources for faculty here on campus. And outside of campus, I am a member of Delta Sigma Theta sorority. I have been a member, this is my 15th year now, almost 15 years. So, in the springtime, I will be 15 years in and I'm excited about that. But it also makes me feel --when I look at my older pictures, they start to look vintage, like you know what I'm talking about. Those old-school pictures. I'm like, wow. Is this my picture or an old-school picture?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

I know, I know! Like why did I where my hair like that.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Exactly. So, it makes me feel... I don't want to say older, but it makes me feel more mature. Now, in the organization.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

You're a seasoned soror.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Exactly.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay, and for the record, I'm also a member of the same organization in case people were not aware. So, let's have a little bit of fun here and I'm gonna just ask some sort of speed questions here in relationship to things that you like. So favorite color?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Red, and this was even before Delta. When I was in high school, I had red hair red, red was my prom dress color. I've just always loved red.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay, excellent. favorite author?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Zora Neale Hurston.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay. Excellent and Zora Neale Hurston for our listeners and viewers is a native of Florida and did a lot of work that sort of depicts spaces in Florida and is from Eatonville, Florida. Favorite song?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Anything by Beyonce, The Weeknd, or Rick Ross.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay, all right. The Queen B herself. Favorite place to vacation.?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Before moving to Orlando, Orlando was my favorite place to vacation. Now it's anywhere new.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay. Excellent. Excellent. Dream car?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Okay. You know, when I was in middle school, my dream car was a PT Cruiser. I saw it in a music video and I say oh, but now I think the car is now, it's no longer my favorite. It's kind of vintage now. Now it is. And this might be old too, but I used to really like H2 Hummers, and I know they don't even make the car anymore. So I don't know if I don't know if I really have one now.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Favorite city to visit in the US?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Favorite city to visit? I'm going to say home, right outside of Baltimore, Maryland.



**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Favorite food?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Ooh, I love food. Which is my favorite? Okay, my mom makes really good corned beef and cabbage.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay, siblings?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Yes, I have a brother, an older brother. This is always so weird when people say how many siblings do you have. So, I have a brother that I grew up with all my life. And so sometimes I'll just say you have a brother. But I also have two other sisters and two other brothers as well.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Favorite actor?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Ooh, my favorite actor. You know, I'm a huge movie buff, so I'm surprised I'm not able to say this quickly, but my line sister is an actress. So I'm gonna say Michelle Michener.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Oh, okay. Okay. Favorite movie?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

I'm a horror fan, so don't think I'm weird but anything scary. I'm the person I can fall asleep watching scary movies. And it does not bother me one bit. I'm not scared. No, I love it. So anything scary.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Chucky, Chucky's Bride. All of that.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

All of it. The gorier the better.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Oh, okay. Sounds fun. Favorite TV show?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Okay, what am I watching? Okay, right now, I really like The Last of Us. It's a show on HBO. You've heard of it.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

I've heard. And there's lots of questions about whether or not we would actually experience that.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Experience some type of apocalypse. Yeah, it's really good. If people are not okay, with gory, you probably won't like it. But it's really good.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

All right, one last thing if you could meet anyone living or dead, who would it be?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

So this part a lot of people don't know about me, Dr. Berry, but Tupac is my favorite rapper. And grad school was really challenging for me, not just in the school, but moving to one of the coldest states. Exactly. He's from Baltimore. One of the things that really got me through grad school was Tupac's music. I actually have a tattoo on my wrist that says thug life. And it doesn't stand for what people think it's for. So he gave it an acronym that says the hate you give little infants, F's, everyone, right? So basically saying that we need to dedicate our life to children and because I value children in education, it was my motivation to make it through grad school and make it through life and be successful. So Tupac,

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay, and I bet a lot of people don't know that that's an acronym. So people wandering around talking about I'm living the thug life, like, not quite. Okay, so where's your next trip?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

So I just told you my 15th Delta Versary is this spring, so me and my line sisters are going to Jamaica this June. So that is, this is our first trip outside of Maryland together. No, actually. No this is our first trip outside of the country together. And we're just really excited about it. And I'm ready to have fun and spend time with my line sisters.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay. So lately, I've been watching episodes of If We're Being Honest with Laverne Cox.

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

I don't think I've seen that. Okay.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Oh, okay. I think it's on HBO. Okay. Okay. And so one of the things that she does as a closing question is to ask, what is it that we should ask that people don't typically ask you. So what should I have asked that I did not ask you?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

That people don't typically ask me. Let's see here. Mmm hmm. You asked really good questions, Dr. Berry. I can't think of anything.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

All right. What's your favorite book?

**Dr. Leah Gaines:**

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay. And we'll leave it there. Thank you so much, Dr. Gaines, for joining us on *Academically Speaking*. And thanks to our audience for listening and watching. This is Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry, Vice Provost Dean of the College of Undergraduate Studies, and this is *Academically Speaking*.