

Professor Patricia Parker

2023-24 Jefferson Award Recipient

*Remarks by Lloyd Kramer, Professor of History and Director of Carolina Public Humanities
Award presented at Faculty Council, October 6, 2023*

Professor Patricia S. Parker is an outstanding recipient of the 2023 Thomas Jefferson Award. Since her arrival at our university in 1998, she has consistently demonstrated her commitment to the Jeffersonian values of “democracy, public service, and the pursuit of knowledge.” She has shown these values through her leadership of the Department of Communication (where she served as chair from 2015 until 2021) and her leadership of the Faculty Diversity Initiatives in the College of Arts & Sciences (where she was the first director between 2012 and 2015).

She has also shown her deep commitment to democratic values in her current leadership roles as the Director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities and as co-chair of the “University Commission on History, Race, and A Way Forward.” In all her work as a teacher, writer, and university leader she has demonstrated how and why public engagement is a key component of the faculty’s educational mission at a great public university.

Professor Parker describes her academic career as an evolving commitment to “servant leadership,” by which she means that constructive leadership emerges from an interactive process that advances the personal growth of other people and the democratic values of the institutions where individuals pursue their own goals and defend shared community values. She explains the importance of such “servant leaders” in her excellent book about the Civil Rights leader Ella Baker, which shows how Baker sought to advance the cause of social justice by establishing equitable partnerships within specific communities.

Drawing on Baker’s historical examples, Professor Parker has argued that the University should be a model for collaborative relationships, shared projects, and open communications among diverse groups of people. Her ideas about leadership, in short, suggest that effective leaders must embed themselves within democratic communities and social processes rather than work as stand-alone figures who demand that others simply adhere to their own policies or priorities.

Professor Parker therefore sees public education and public universities as the foundation for a democratic society. In all her work inside and outside the University, she affirms that democratic institutions require non-hierarchical communications and respect *for all persons* who are members of those institutions. These values have shaped her leadership at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities (IAH) because she sees the IAH as a place where the free, creative exchange of ideas can flourish in faculty exchanges and in conversations with people who come to UNC from outside the University.

Equally important, Professor Parker is the co-chair of UNC’s complex, essential efforts to come to terms with the racist exclusions and hierarchies that shaped our university’s history from the time of its founding in the 1790s and that left profound legacies in the educational system of

our whole state. Her leadership of the “University Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward” is thus another example of her efforts to democratize our University, in part by looking critically at the ideas and actions of North Carolina’s nineteenth and twentieth-century “Jeffersonians” who claimed to support democracy but then violated democratic ideas by supporting racist exclusions, Jim Crow laws, and an educational system that blocked equitable learning opportunities for North Carolina’s always-diverse population and citizens.

This kind of “critical reckoning” with history requires an engagement with the legacies of Thomas Jefferson and his early American allies, so Patricia Parker asserts a deep commitment to what might be called a “Jeffersonian belief” in the power of knowledge and the social value of democratic ideals; and then she carries those ideas against and far beyond the anti-democratic racism of Thomas Jefferson himself.

Her service to the University and her concept of “servant leadership” have thus continually enriched both our university and the wider social life of our state; and (in the tradition of Ella Baker) she strongly supports the institutions, values, and communicative processes of a democratic society. For all these reasons, Patricia Parker is a most worthy recipient of the Jefferson Award. She condemns the profound flaws of the enslaver Thomas Jefferson while she also advocates enduring Jeffersonian ideas about the inalienable rights of all human beings--which continue to sustain democratic aspirations in our own educational context and civic life.