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Regional

Jackson teaches African-American life with literature

The history of African-Americans has become more relevant in the American psyche thanks in large part to literature. Many authors, whether African-Americans or not, have incorporated the narrative of blacks in America as an essential part of American history. Someone who studies and teaches this subject is Candice Jackson, an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Born in Pontiac, Mich., Jackson grew up in Mississippi. She received her bachelor's degree in English at Tougaloo College near Jackson, Miss., and her master's in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she also received her doctorate. Although an expert in African-American literature, Jackson was initially interested in becoming a lawyer.

"At Tougaloo I was in an honors English class and we had to do a research paper and my professor who had known that I was interested in English but also in the law decided to give me an interesting case on the plagiarism of Alex Haley's 'Roots' and the case brought by two other authors who claimed that Haley had plagiarized their novels," Jackson said. "So I spent a Saturday afternoon in a dusty law library and decided this was not for me. I really enjoyed the analysis of the literature much more than the law."

Throughout African-American literature one encounters frequent themes of racism, slavery and inequality. Yet, the importance and perspective given to those themes have changed over time. "The concept of slavery is still applicable to something like a neo slave narrative of a Charles Johnson's 'Middle Passage.'" Some of the remnants of slavery, the psychological bounds are still present in modern day African-American litera-

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

ture," Jackson said.

An increasing number of authors of African-American literature are turning to the Internet for self-publishing. While this practice has allowed much more literature to reach the public, according to Jackson that could be a double-edged sword.

"The problem is that they don't have the editorial support that they should, that they would have with a mainstream publisher," Jackson explained. "So you have all of these things out there and sometimes it happens (for the authors) that you will achieve a small following and maybe if that small following turns into a big one a mainstream publisher will pick them up. So sometimes a very good author who deserves the nurturing to become a great author is hidden."

Many scholars of African-American literature agree that the main thrust of the genre is in showing how the struggle of African-Americans has contrasted with the ideals of the United States.

"In my classes I have to make sure the students understand that this is American history because so much of African-American literature is rooted in American history," Jackson said. "It is about dealing with some very hard truths and hypocrisies about the ideals of brotherhood in a 'Christian' country, but these are the ideals on which this country was founded and that this literature sort of exposes that. And sometimes that is very difficult for students to deal with."

Jackson has also been looking at some stereotypical ideas linked to black culture. "I started to look at some of the issues coming up about black underworld and black criminality," she said.



Daniel Shields/SIUE

Dr. Jackson teaching students at SIUE.

"That evolved from my master's thesis on Donald Goines, whose popular novel, 'Pimp, the Story of my Life,' served as a real blueprint for some pimps in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to this modern day re-imagining of what the pimp is. Now we say pimp and it means to flourish, to 'pimp my ride.' Jackson even pointed out a book called, 'Pimp my Cubicle.' It's all about the embellishments of life, Jackson said, pointing to the evolution in the concept of pimping.

"The persona has completely changed

from putting women on the street corner. It is not about that any more. You have little teenagers who are talking about how they are going to pimp their car out," Jackson said, adding that she often wants to say, "But wait. You don't want that."

Jackson teaches a number of courses about African-American literature to SIUE students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. "One thing I joke with the students about is that I teach literature and life," Jackson said. "So I am hoping

that they are changed. I hope that they see my enthusiasm for it and read some more and go forth. I see a bigger change right now with the black students because for some of them I am the first black professor that they have had."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.