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African-American lit a window into culture

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Regional

African-American lit a window into culture

African-American literature is much more than pure narrative. It provides us with a window into a world and a time that most people can't recognize because they seem so remote. And it can expose a cruel reality that many have trouble dealing with even today.

Someone who studies the context in which African-American literature has developed is Elizabeth Cali, an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. A native of Milwaukee, Wis., she obtained her bachelor's in English from Indiana University in Bloomington, her master's in creative writing from Northwestern University and her doctorate in English from the University of Texas at San Antonio. Like many other professors she was inspired to become a teacher by one of her own teachers.

"It was the intersection of a couple of different instances," Cali said. "For one, I had a teacher in high school who just really lit a fire and inspired me to learn in ways they hadn't before. That teacher asked us to think about things in ways that made us curious, instead of telling us how to think." The other reason had more to do with her personal inclinations.

"I have always been a communicator," she said. "I live to just talk with my friends, talk with new people that I am meeting wherever, and that passion for communicating and meeting new people inspired me to take what I have learned into the classroom. I love speaking with my students and just hearing what they have to say." One wonders if such experiences make her see herself as an inspirational teacher?

"On your best days that's your grandest hope, that you are inspiring your students to think in ways that maybe they weren't thinking in the past or to add to the thinking that they have already been doing," Cali said. "I was just talking with a student when we finished class, and he and I were talking about critical thinking as a process. It's a way of life. And I think that's my goal in my classroom, to get students thinking about themselves as living, continuing critical thinkers."

She applies this same approach to studying African-American literature.

"I think that one of the main focuses of my own teaching is to ask students about the social and political contexts and cultural contexts of the readings," she said. "I



Photo by Michael Nathe

Professor Elizabeth Cali.

think that is one of the exciting things about teaching and learning African-American literature, that the literary traditions are always interactive with cultural, historical and socio-political contexts. So it's sort of this organic and interactive conversation between contexts that is why I love the print culture as much as I do."

One of the African-American authors she has studied is Frances Harper, an abolitionist and herself a prolific writer. "In many ways she was a race woman," Cali explains. "Her

life and every avenue she pursued was in agitation for rights for African Americans and for African-American women. She was certainly an anti-slavery activist and agitator, but also a poet, an essayist, a speaker and a novelist. She wrote three serialized novels in the *Christian Recorder*. Her masterpiece, some might say, in the end of her career, was 'Iola Leroy,' which was her full novel that wasn't serialized." Harper was also involved in the temperance movement, which supported prohibition of alcohol sale

and consumption.

"In the 19th century the social norm was in so many ways about protecting the institution of the family, and alcohol was seen as a danger to the constitution of the nuclear family," said Cali. "And especially I think in the African-American communities alcohol was seen as one more way in which something could be used to destroy them. In that way, yes, she was extremely active, agitating against the use of alcohol in any sort of community, especially

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

African-American communities." Another author Cali has studied is Zora Neale Hurston, an African-American writer of the Harlem renaissance.

"She is much more modern. The Harlem renaissance would be 1926. Most students end up reading her novel 'Their Eyes Were Watching God.' But in my interaction with her work, I have spent much more time in her publications in the literary magazine published by the Harlem renaissance movement," said Cali.

Hurston published her short story 'Sweat' in 1926 in *Fire Magazine* and became famous in a number of ways.

"Hurston did a lot of research on African-American folk tales and brought them to her contemporary audience," said Cali. "She also used black vernacular English in her literature. She did this code switching because she was speaking to an African-American audience and also speaking to a white audience, suggesting that, 'I can use this language that you have imposed upon us in ways that can benefit the African-American communities that I'm a part of.'"

Cali's newest project has to do with the concepts of respectability and revolution, particularly in the way they appeared in print and circulated in the American culture of the 19th century.

"I'm working on a current small publication in what the actual print and text looks like on the page, even as it is maintaining the respectability of writing in this country that values literature so much, while also proposing revolutionary concepts," Cali said. "So we will be focusing again on Frances Harper and an African-American man named James T. Holly and their revolutionary goals."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. 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.