UNH English: Leading the way in new scholarship

Prof. Baumgartner: “Eye-opening” reading and research in African-American literature and history

Students in Professor Kabria Baumgartner’s English 787: English Major Seminar, titled “Black New England,” not only read and discuss African-American literature and history, they also help to document it.

“The hope is that students find a topic in the 18-, 19-, or 20-century that they then want to further explore in the archive. The final product will be a digital humanities project,” Baumgartner explains. Her students will produce digital media, such as documentary videos, for the class, but their work will also contribute to a larger project for the National Park Service, which awarded Baumgartner a grant.

“The main goal of the grant is to collect and compile materials related to the African-American experience in Essex County, Massachusetts. These materials haven’t been compiled; they haven’t been cataloged. They might just be sitting in a storage box in a basement, and our task is to go to as many archives as we can to figure out what materials are where.”

For instance, students who study Sarah Parker Remond, a nineteenth-century anti-slavery speaker and physician, might visit the Peabody Essex Museum, which has materials on the Remond family. And the work continues into the 20-century, tracing “the role of African Americans in the civil rights movement in Essex County.” Or students might investigate the centuries-long tradition of what was called Negro Election Day, or the Black Picnic.

“Stories like that are ones we’re trying to find and trace as part of this project. I hope students feel that too as they’re working on this. It’s not just a project they’re going to turn in for this class but that it has a larger function in helping the National Park Service do this historical preservation,” says Baumgartner.

Eventually, the work of Baumgartner, co-researcher Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello of Salem State University, and their students could guide educational programming at park sites.

Baumgartner’s students first read works by African American authors in New England, including Harriet Wilson’s New Hampshire-based novel Our Nig (1859), with which students were unfamiliar. Students then discussed themes of womanhood, religion, slavery and servitude, and racism in the novel.

“I think students are thinking about how to have that conversation about race and racism. I like to think it’s eye-opening for them.” Baumgartner encourages her students to ask, “Why haven’t you read this book before now? It was a great way to talk about erasure of the black experience, which is precisely why the National Park Service is funding this project because they’re trying to uncover and recover some of that history.”

Baumgartner and her students are thinking even bigger: “Because we have such a long history, there are so many stories and experiences. If we also open it up to people of color, what a fascinating trove that would be. We’ll see where it goes.”
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