

Regional

Literature, religion influence scholar's work

As African-American authors have become more prominent in the literary world, so have the number of scholars who study them. One such person is Trisha Brooks, an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

A native of Allentown, Pa., she obtained her bachelor's degree in English at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania, a master's in divinity from Harvard, another master's and a doctorate from Tufts University in Massachusetts. It was while in college she discovered how her passion for religion and spirituality could be seen reflected in literature.

"I was reading in my English classes so I wanted to see if I could combine those two areas," she said. "And I had a great mentor and he suggested that I apply to the Harvard Divinity School."

One of the African-American authors she has been studying is Amanda Smith. Smith was born into slavery in Maryland in the 19th century and she ended up being freed by her owner. She traveled to the North and lived as a free woman washing clothes to make a living.

"It ended up being her faith and her spiritual experience that helped her to survive slavery and her experiences struggling with life in the North," Brooks said. "She felt that she was called to be a preacher and a missionary so after her husband died she ended up traveling abroad. She actually traveled all over Europe, to India, and also she spent eight years in Liberia in Africa. I chose her as one the figures to focus on because I was really interested in her travel because that's not what you typically think of when you think of black women in the 19th century." Smith was admired not only by black women but also by some white women of her time.

"She had a really strong appeal to white audiences and part of that might have been that she had sort of a conservative way of presenting herself," Brooks said. "She really liked the Quakers and so that really



Professor Trisha Brooks

Courtesy of Skip Brooks

influenced how she presented herself. She was sort of a non-threatening figure in that way, I think. I am still struggling to understand how she was able to keep her audience because she was so critical of white racism. I find it shocking that as critical as she was, her popularity continued. She was also very charismatic and she was known for her singing as well, so she engaged a lot of audiences that way." Smith was also active in the temperance movement of early 20th century.

"The idea of the temperance movement was to really respond to the suffering that women and children were experiencing in the family as the result of alcoholism," explained Brooks. "The thinking from women social activists was if they could eliminate alcohol they could improve family life and women's lives and the lives of children as well. This was particularly important for many African Americans. So in addition to fighting against slavery, they also fought against this."

Brooks has also studied another African-American author and traveler, Nancy Prince.

"She was born in the North in Massachusetts in the early 19th century to parents who survived the middle passage, so she had a very direct connection to Africans and was influenced by their experience in slavery," said Brooks. "She traveled around the world. She visited Russia and that's where she spent a good deal of her life. She moved there and lived there for about eight years with her husband, who worked in the court of the Russian Czar. After his death she returned to the U.S., and traveled to Jamaica as well." Given that Brooks has focused her short scholarly career on two African-American women who traveled a lot, one wonders if there are some lessons to learn from that.

"I think what I have learned is that we can't really appreciate their travels unless we consider what motivated them," she said. "For them they were really motivated by their spiritual experience, but also their

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

lived experience of oppression and suffering." Brooks said that from Amanda Smith we learn that black women travel because they believe that they were called by God to share the Gospel.

"At the same time they help us understand that travel is very much tied in with imperialism and colonization, so even as she is critiquing racism she is participating in that larger project of imperialism," Brooks said. "I think it complicates how we look at African Americans in relationship to colonization."

Brooks also thinks that from Nancy Prince we learn that not all African Americans find home abroad.

"The thinking was that if we go to another country we'd find a place where we have more freedom. She discovered that's not the case and we need to focus on attaining our full freedom here in America," said Brooks, whose newest project involves ships.

"My interest in this topic goes along with studying women who travel," Brooks explained. "How they got around was on ships. So I'm very interested in how ships functioned in the Atlantic world in the 19th century. There are many scholars who have studied ships before, such as Paul Gilroy and Catherine McKittrick, who I use in my writing. I would like to think about how ships function within a Christian context as well because that is shaping people's experience in the 19th century ships. And what is the relationship of the ship as a metaphor, but also as a slave ship?"

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.