

African American Literary Studies At SIUE Outpaces English Departments Nationwide

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EDWARDSVILLE - The African American Literary Studies (AALS) unit within the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville College of Arts and Sciences' Department of English Language and Literature has expanded its group of professors with expertise in Black literature and literary history.

AALS currently offers approximately 15 African American-related courses and provides more classes on Black subject matter than almost any other English department in the country, according to Howard Ramsy II, Ph.D., English Language and Literature professor and AALS faculty who specializes in Black poetry, contemporary African-American literature, comic books, and Black men writers.

"I have always been proud of the fact that we teach such a wide array of African-American literary and cultural studies courses," said Ramsy, who began at SIUE in 2003. "And just as important, I'm excited that we have enrolled so many Black students, approximately 200-250, in our classes each year."

Other AALS faculty include:

- Tisha Brooks, Ph.D., associate professor, with specialties in 19th century African-American literature, religion and spirituality, autobiography, travel writing, and slavery's legacy in literature and film
- Elizabeth Cali, Ph.D., associate professor, with specialties in 19th century African-American literature, Black women writers and editors, and Black print culture studies
- Donovan Ramon, Ph.D., assistant professor, with specialties in Literatures of the African Diaspora, African-American Literature, Narratives of Racial Passing, Critical Race Theory, and American Literature
- Cindy Reed, Ph.D., assistant professor, with specialties in representations of Black girlhood, creativity, and urban space in 20th and 21st century African-American literature

AALS has a rich history of building knowledge concerning literary art and culture.

“African-American literary study is beneficial because it provides Black students with an opportunity to see themselves, their lives, and their experiences reflected in the texts we read,” noted Brooks, who has been at SIUE since 2013. “Many Black students take our courses because they provide a space of recognition and belonging for students who often feel marginalized in a predominantly white institution.”

In recent years, AALS has offered such courses as African American Women's Writing, Black Girl Magic, African American Religious Perspectives, Black Lives Matter, and the Black Fantastic Imagination. In addition, classes offered have been devoted to individual figures such as Toni Morrison, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Jay-Z.

AALS courses contribute to English, General Education, Black Studies, and Women's Studies requirements, and give students opportunities to explore a wider range of texts in the American and global literary canon, cited Rambsy.

“In addition, students who take the courses,” added Brooks, “engage in critical conversations about legacies of racial and gendered violence, injustice, and practices of freedom that are necessary for navigating and transforming our current world.”

In 2019 and 2021, Brooks, Cali, and Rambsy earned funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to organize summer institutes focusing on Frederick Douglass. The NEH summer institutes involved schoolteachers from across the country and gave AALS at SIUE opportunities to further establish a national reputation.

“The NEH summer institutes have been instrumental in connecting our team of African-American literary studies scholars at SIUE with 50 schoolteachers from more than 20 different states,” said Cali, who began at SIUE in 2014. “Just as important, the institutes invariably highlight pathways between advanced study of Frederick Douglass and myriad topics for further study in African-American literature.”

The addition of Reed in 2020 and Ramon in 2021 ensures that AALS can further expand its course offerings and reach even more students.

“Many students, regardless of race, come to the University with limited interaction with African-American literary art,” explained Reed. “The work we achieve through these courses exposes students to the beauty and nuance of the literature while stressing how much representation matters.”

“I look forward to all that we can accomplish as an expanded group of African-American literary scholars,” Ramon said. “I am definitely eager to teach GAME (Goal-Oriented African American Males Excel), which is our course for first-year Black students, as well African-American literature courses at the undergraduate and graduate level.”

“With Brooks and Cali, we were already expanding our capabilities, but now with the additions of Ramon and Reed, we’re positioned to do even more with African-American literary studies,” concluded Rambsy. “This all reminds me of the end of Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon* when the main character discovers that maybe, just maybe they can fly.”

Photos:

Department of English Language and Literature’s African American Literary Studies faculty from left to right: Howard Rambsy II, Ph.D., professor; Tisha Brooks, Ph.D., associate professor; Elizabeth Cali, Ph.D., associate professor; Donavan Ramon, Ph.D., assistant professor; and Cindy Reed, Ph.D., assistant professor.