A Love of History and a Passion to Teach

Doctoral student Jacqueline Allain talks history, teaching, and the Duke Graduate Summer Academy

Not everyone can say they knew in middle school what they wanted to be when they grew up, but Jacqueline Allain has always had a love of history (her favorite subject in school) and knew she was destined to teach. She always wanted to go to college, attend graduate school, and earn a doctorate degree. Allain, doctoral student in the department of history, began her academic journey in sociology with a focus on the sociology of education and educational inequity. But her sophomore year in college she enrolled in a Caribbean history class, and well, the rest is history.

“That course totally changed the plan of my life. I was pulled in. What I really came to love about history was the practice of finding out about stories of women of different races, people of color, enslaved people, and so on, who have lived in the past who might not have left a really robust record, but nonetheless have left us stories,” said Allain on her move from sociology to history.

Last summer Allain enrolled in the Duke Graduate Summer Academy which offers online short courses that introduce Duke graduate students to skills, tools, and knowledge that augment their regular coursework/research. What’s unique about the program is that it covers topics not typically included in a graduate curriculum, which was appealing to Allain. She signed up for the short course, Teaching with Archives, taught by Trudi Abel (cultural historian and archivist at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library). The course was a truly interdisciplinary experience by studying with other students from various backgrounds, as well as professors from other departments including Clare Woods (associate professor of classical studies) and Tom Robisheaux (professor of history).

During the short course, Abel displayed a collection of papers called the Robert Anderson papers (a collection of correspondence, documents, and print materials belonging to merchant and landowner Robert Anderson of Williamsburg and Yorktown, Virginia), which the Rubenstein had recently purchased. The collection includes a number of historic documents such as letters by the famous abolitionist and human rights activist, Angelina Grimké Weld. Abel encouraged students to think about how they could use such documents in their own teaching. Allain began her own research and returned to the Rubenstein to process (photograph and transcribe) many of the documents, including the Weld pieces.

Allain explained, “It kind of spiraled into a bigger project that I took on initially as just a side project. The papers are from 19th century Civil War Virginia, which has nothing to do with what I study, which is French Caribbean History. But I became so interested in the stories and wrote a paper that I plan to submit to a journal, where I uncovered a legal dispute between a white family and a Black family in the aftermath of slavery.”

When explaining her week-long experience at the Graduate Summer Academy, Allain said she wanted to learn more about how instructors can use historic documents in their teaching. As a historian, she is well aware of the utility of archival materials as teaching materials, but she wanted to learn more about how to incorporate those types of materials into her own teaching, especially considering Duke has such an amazing collection of archival materials.

“Allain is excited about her future teaching Caribbean history at the college, community, or high school level. When you love what you teach, it doesn’t matter where you do it, as long as you are sharing your passion. ♥

“Studying disciplines like history allows us to see that the world we live in today isn’t an inevitable inescapable fact. It can be remade again and again. History helps us push the boundaries of our social and political imagination in a really important way,” said Allain.

“The Rubenstein is really a world class archive, said Allain. It seems wrong to be here at Duke for six or seven years and not fully make use of all the resources at my disposal, including teaching with this amazing collection of documents that we have access to.”

Allain describes history as a discipline that falls between the humanities and the social sciences. It could be argued that history is a bit of a hybrid discipline. She clarifies that the humanities and social sciences allows us to think about different possibilities about how we might make and remake the world. By studying history we’re able to see how people who lived in very different times and places had radically different ways of organizing their societies.

Interested in learning more about the Graduate Summer Academy? Check out their website for more details and mark your calendar for next summer.