Mr. & Mrs. Prince: Dean Gerzina Gives Inspiring Fall 2017 Plenary Lecture
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With November just around the corner, it’s expected for one to think of Thanksgiving. Consequently, it’s expected for one to think of the pilgrims, who braved the ocean blue to come from England to the New World, and their descendants, who populated Massachusetts, and later, the entirety of the United States. However, that is the story of only one group of people. There are many other groups of people whose stories should also be told, and that is what Dean Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina set out to do when she began to write Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and into Legend.

To write about a people whose stories have never been told, African-Americans in Western Massachusetts, is no easy feat. “I thought it would take a year,” Dean Gerzina told students at the Fall 2017 Plenary Lecture. “It took seven.”

One of the biggest difficulties Gerzina found in writing about Lucy Terry and Abijah Prince, the protagonists of her biography, was the lack of available historical materials and primary sources. Reflecting upon her previous biographical subjects — Dora Carrington and Frances Hodgson Burnett, both of whom were white British people — Dean Gerzina had found almost too many sources. She had once believed Lucy and Abijah would be the same, but then found that “all the things you’d think you’d need to write a biography were missing.”

It was not until Gerzina discovered her own ancestors’ personal documents on Lucy and Abijah that her biography started to take shape.

Stunningly enough, Lucy and Abijah were not the only slaves in Deerfield, Massachusetts. Seventeen houses on the Main Street alone held enslaved people. Unlike common belief, there was slavery in the North as well, and it wasn’t limited to just Deerfield. Concord, Massachusetts and Stonington, Connecticut both had significant slave populations. Slaves were imported in Portsmouth, New Hampshire as a significant leg of the Triangle Trade.

All of this was included in Dean Gerzina’s lecture to pose two critical questions: who or what gets remembered, and how?

Why is it that everyone knows about the pilgrims, but only a handful in comparison know about Lucy Terry and Abijah Prince or Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman?

It is a question Dean Gerzina considers “now that [she’s] discovering Western Massachusetts monuments we don’t know about.”

Some of these monuments include statues of Phillis Wheatley, a renowned African poet from Eastern Massachusetts, and Sojourner Truth, an African-American activist. Both women in their statues “looked very thoughtful,” Dean Gerzina notes.

Dean Gerzina also addresses more easily remembered, controversial statues — those celebrating prominent figures of the Confederate States of America. Only erected decades after the Civil War, Dean Gerzina includes them in her lecture to help students think more critically about who in history and we as a people bring to the forefront, and who we leave behind.

It is important, not just for biographers, but also for scholars, that we use archival research to pull out this hidden history and push beyond what is given to us in the library. As W.E.B. Du Bois himself once said:

“The function of the university is not simply to teach breadwinning … or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.”

Photography by Anna Hartmann.