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Authors

Acebo, Brooke
Amussen, Susan

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Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Susan Amussen, Distinguished Professor of History and UC Merced Presidential Endowed Chair in the Humanities

By Brooke Acebo

Brooke Acebo (BA), HCRES Undergraduate Journal's Editor-in-Chief: Thank you for taking the time to interview with us, Dr. Amussen. For our readers and all of us at the HCRES Journal Editorial Board, could you tell us briefly about your research area and how your work has shaped your field of study?

Susan Amussen (SA): I am a historian of what we call early modern Britain and the Atlantic world, looking mostly at the period between about 1560 and 1700. My focus has generally been on how people experience structures of power, and it is generally what is now called intersectional research, though that term was not used when I started out. I started wanting to know about women's lives but realized that I wanted to also know about the relationship of patriarchy and capitalism. So, my dissertation and my first book were on the intersections of class and gender, and then in my second book I looked at English settlement in the Caribbean and the way slavery and race were created at home. Mine was the first major monograph to discuss women's lives and gender in early modern England, and my second was the first by an English historian (the Caribbeanists had done it before) to think about how enslavement and colonization changed England, not just the Caribbean. I've written three broad articles with my colleague Allyson Poska on how gender shaped the Atlantic world, to emphasize you cannot talk about a big historiographical theme and leave out women. I finished a book started by my late husband on the cultural idea of the world turned upside down and the anxieties it provoked in the 17th century. And most recently I just published a book on why Shakespeare was Shakespeare – a stealth introduction to historical method along the way.

BA: As you near your retirement, we have learned that historians never truly stop working. Could you tell us about your future research projects?

SA: Generally, in my retirement I want to think more about patriarchy as a social formation that changes over time. How does it adapt? How does it survive? The current piece of this is focused on the children, mostly boys, portrayed in elite portraits at the end of the 17th century: who were they? What happened to them when they grew up? I am hoping to track a few of them to tell a story about the lives of trafficked children.

BA: You came to UC Merced in 2008. What brought you here and how did UC Merced evolve into your professional home during your time here?

SA: I watched UC Merced for some years and was hired the third time I applied for a job! I wanted to come because of what was then a focus on interdisciplinary research and teaching. As a feminist scholar, I have always been pretty interdisciplinary, and I have been in conversation with literary scholars for many years. So, it seemed like a good fit. Also, I had been teaching at a non-residential university outside my specialization for many years and wanted to be part of a campus again!

BA: As a follow up to the previous question, how has UC Merced changed over the years?

SA: When I arrived in 2008, there were 2700 students. There were three academic buildings – COB, KL, and SE1. SSM was under construction. It was small, we knew almost everyone and did everything. We were making things up as we went. It is now much bigger, and everything is more formal, which is good and bad. It is harder to do new things. But it is great to have more colleagues, and more majors, and more support for faculty and students.

BA: Since you have seen so much change in both the campus and student body in the time you have been in Merced, what was something unexpected that surprised you about UC Merced?

SA: I had not been regularly teaching undergraduates for 18 years when I arrived. PowerPoint was new, so was the Learning Management System – at that time something we called CROPS, now Cat Courses. Both of those really changed the way I taught. In the old days, you put an article on reserve in the library, and students went in to read it. Now we could post them online. And I showed slides once a semester, because I had to haul a heavy slide projector into class, and then the shades did not close and ... So, I had to relearn to teach. Also, I had been working primarily with adults for 18 years, and so I had to get to know young students again.

BA: We know the last course you are offering this semester is “HIST 179: Everything has a History,” a course that focuses on gender, sexuality, women's reproductive history, and power structures. Why did you decide to offer this course as your final class at UC Merced?

SA: Last spring I was trying to decide what to teach, and I was debating between my course on early modern women and gender, and my course on early modern Britain. At the same time, I was watching the news and thinking there is a history here. So, I ended up using parts of both classes that seemed to me particularly relevant to the current moment, to help students understand the way the big questions of the day – from LGBTQ issues and abortion, to immigration, citizenship, and individual rights have been around for a long time. And particularly for the legal rights currently challenged by the government, these were *fought* and argued for 400 years ago. I hope it is helpful to know you have a long history of people for fighting for things you care about – but also arguing about them.

BA: What was your favorite undergraduate or graduate class to teach at UC Merced?

SA: Oh, that is tough. I love all my children equally! I always like the course I am teaching at a given moment. I have enjoyed teaching HIST 100 (I love the range of readings) and the capstone, but I also love teaching about the work I do as a scholar on the more distant past in Europe.

BA: As we reflect on your outstanding career as a historian and faculty member at UC Merced, what would you define as your greatest or most fulfilling accomplishment?

SA: When I started graduate school in 1976, there was no established historian working on the history of women in early modern England. Now there are many, and younger scholars are doing amazing work. It's been a real privilege to be part of that. At the same time, I was educated at Ivy League universities that had a culture that was very upper middle class and upper class. In teaching both at my previous institution, Union Institute and University, and at UC Merced, I have worked with students from a wide range of backgrounds who have also taught me. So, I

have been lucky to teach things I care about to really interesting students. I have had a fortunate career!

BA: As students at UC Merced, we have all benefited from mentorship from the faculty here. Could you tell us about your mentors and the advice and guidance that helped shape your development as an academic?

SA: Well, when I was a student, we did not talk about mentors as much, and much of it was pretty informal, and not always helpful! But a few of my early teachers were older men who either supported me in doing work they would never do, or taught ideas and scholarship they did not much like because they knew we needed to know it. And I have always remembered that: my job is not to teach what I like, but to be responsible to a range of views and approaches to work.

BA: Reflecting on your career highlights and all that you have accomplished at UC Merced and in your field, what advice would you offer to history students and new and upcoming historians?

SA: Not one piece of advice, but some observations. Life does not always follow the path you expect. When it goes in a new direction, know that you will learn something from it. Do not be afraid of hard work: you can do it. Trust yourself and your instincts. And be kind: it costs nothing and makes life much pleasanter.

BA: What do you think you will miss most about UC Merced?

SA: Oh, that is hard. I will miss my colleagues, and the ever-changing group of students. I will miss being in the classroom. I will miss the natural beauty that surrounds the campus: the snow-capped Sierras in winter, the cows grazing in spring and fall, the vernal pools, and the beautiful sunsets when I leave campus late on winter evenings.

BA: Other than your next project, what are you looking forward to most in retirement? Do you have any plans that might be surprising to our readers?

SA: I am looking forward to reading for pleasure and being able to travel when I want to. I do not think those are very surprising!

BA: Thank you, Dr. Amussen for participating in this interview and for your time here at UC Merced. I am so grateful to have had this opportunity to get to know more about you and to honor you with this special issue dedicated to your research.