

SPECIAL EPISODE: Prof. Kisha Tracy, Harrod Lecturer, on Decolonizing the Study of Disability in the Middle Ages

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Kate Jewell (Host): Welcome to Perspectives, which is a special episode on the Harrod Lecture series with Professor Kisha Tracy.

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Kate Jewell (Host): Professor Tracy, would you please tell the audience about yourself?

Kisha Tracy: Sure. Thank you for having me today. I am a medievalist. I have a degree in and actually in medieval studies rather than English studies.

And then I teach everything in the English Studies Department before Shakespeare from the beginning of the world to Shakespeare, which is not the easiest task in the world. But mostly what I do in medieval studies is work on disability studies. That's my main focus. I do a lot of work with mental health in the Middle Ages.

I work on St. Dymphna in particular, who is the patron saint of mental health. And I work on a lot of literature, but also, medieval studies is a very interdisciplinary field. So I work in pretty much every humanities field out there. I dabble at least a little bit into, but also I do other things like the scholarship of teaching and learning. I work on how students learn and how to help them better learn. And I also work on cultural heritage more broadly in various ways, both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

Kate Jewell (Host): Fantastic. Well, congratulations this year because you are Fitchburg State University's Harrod lecturer.

So maybe before you tell us a little bit about your topic and what it is that you produce the Harrod lecturer on could you tell us a little bit about what you do as a Harrod lecturer, and then tell us a little bit about what your topic is.

Kisha Tracy: Sure. Every year, Fitchburg State puts out a call for applications for the Harrod Lecture.

And that is usually a pretty long abstract as well as a fairly detailed bibliography that goes with it. And this goes into a committee, and that committee chooses. One or two, usually two for the year. And they decide, especially on the criteria on both the research and the topics, but also how well such things might apply to teaching and learning on Fitchburg State campus. But contributions to the field of the discipline in particular.

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Kisha Tracy: And so once you're chosen, which I'm very excited about once you are chosen, then you give a lecture either in the fall or the spring. To the whole campus public lecture. And then that is usually turned into a publication from Fitchburg State.

Sometimes they wait a few years to collect the Harrod lectures so that it's more of a book style. And then that goes into the archives at Fitchburg State. So yeah, that is kind of the process.

Kate Jewell (Host): So what was your lecture and your research about what stories and what topics are you delving into?

Kisha Tracy: Yeah, so mine was decolonizing the study of disability in the Middle Ages. And this is a project that I've been working on in various ways for a very long time, pre covid and on the idea started to percolate in my head when the book, a medieval disability source book was coming out.

This is an open access book, and a good friend and colleague of mine was the editor of that book, and I contributed a few of these. And it's a collection of primary sources. That then scholars in the field would add introductions through a disability lens in reading those texts so that it could be used in the classroom because we didn't have a textbook for medieval disability studies.

And we really wanted it to be accessible and all of those sorts of things. And it's great. It's very, it's a fantastic resource and I have used it in the classroom. But while that was being created, the editor Cameron McNabb she realized that it was, really just Europe that was being represented.

A lot of what happens in medieval studies, it's changing, and this is part of the reason that I started thinking about this in the last few years, but it has traditionally focused on Europe, but in the last decade people have realized there's, more to the world than Europe during that, thousand years roughly time period.

And so the global Middle Ages as a field has really started to develop. And then when she made that realization, she really figured out in good conscience that she couldn't call it medieval disability source book generally. So she added the subtitle of Western Europe to, that volume. And that got me really thinking. Well, what about the rest of it? And how do we get there? So as much as the global Middle Ages is still being worked out, global disability

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studies is even more being figured out as a subsection of the greater field. And so we were thinking about different ways that, you know, that this kind of thing can work.

Kisha Tracy: And how to get scholars who, you know, we want representation to be able to be in that sort of a volume. And so I've really tried to start thinking about what this a companion volume would look like. I. What we need to include in it. And really started thinking about this. And then this lecture is bringing the threads together of a lot of different things that I and the rest of the field are thinking about.

And so what I talk about in the lecture is that we have to situate medieval disability studies within medieval studies and disability studies more broadly. And then when you start talking about global of both of those, there's a lot more considerations that have to take place, and one of those is the colonization of the field.

That has happened for a very long time. And so we have to situate it within this new idea of global medieval studies and then all the pushback that has come as a result of that we have to think about if even the word medieval is. Is useful outside of Europe, although that's a bigger field consideration that I don't have the cache to be able to solve that.

But that is a consideration as well. And then it's also one of those things where if you call it pre-colonial time periods, you're also centering the colonial in that aspect, and so pre-modern is also a possibility as well. But where did we make that cutoff? And so there's a lot of considerations that go into it, and you need people in the field to actually, agree.

So then you have, we have to get into things like western centric views of medicine and disability and all of those sorts of issues as well. But with that also comes things like we can't do: have too many generalizations about what indigenous populations are like 'cause you've got a lot of different versions. Even if we just think about Africa. Africa's a very large place. There's a lot of different things going on there historically and in the modern era. So it's like we have to, we can't make generalizations about entire groups of people. Just like we've said in medieval disability studies. We can't even make generalizations about the entire medieval period in Europe. Like we can't, it's just not possible to do. But we had to be very careful about those sorts of things. We're also dealing with the myths about medieval disability because when people first think about it and hear it, what often it is that everybody in the Middle Ages was treated horribly who had a disability.

All of these sorts of things, which are all myths and untrue and have to untangle all of that. People of all types, ranks and places in society had disabilities. And then how do we, how

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did they get treated and were they treated, one way, one place, one place and one way another.

Kisha Tracy: How exactly did all of that happen? So we have to break through those myths as well to get at what actually is there, and then you get into the sources which I mean, one of the problems with most, non-Western sources is that they're through Western lenses, especially if you're getting into translations.

And that's where a lot of the language issues come into play because there's nobody on the planet that is an expert in all of the languages necessary to do all of this work. So you have to be sure that you're getting the right language, the translations, you're getting all of this sort of thing, but you're also getting translations that are free from that colonial lens.

And even some examples of things that we see. Like I was talking about a Japanese text, which was 790s to 1180s approximately. But the translation that is the most popular of that text, there's one story in it. The story is titled, A Woman who Could Not Speak is Healed Owing to the Grace of the Canaan of Ishyama and canaan is, a goddess and the translation literally says handicapped, like the word is literally translated to handicap, which even in English has all kinds of problems and connotations and all of the things to deal with that. But [00:09:00] also, is that a proper translation of the word? And even if it is the proper translation of the original word. Is the same baggage associated with that word that we, that in English we have. It's a whole thing. And I actually was really at the same time this was all going on and I was developing this, one of my students in Writing I was working on a disability project about words translating from Spanish to English. Disability words that don't translate from Spanish to English. Very fascinating stuff 'cause it was making me really think about this was like, wow, that's the baggage is not like even if we translate that word in that way, that baggage is not there. And for the person who's speaking the original language doesn't have that connotation and they don't know why. They might not, if they don't have some, someone there to translate that they don't have that explanation.

And thinking about all this with translations of these texts, and there's all kinds of layers there of what we need to get at. Even things like, we have African myths that have, especially the creation of human beings. And there's this one that's really great, this Uruba n one that talks about that God got drunk essentially while he was making humans. And that's why we have humans that don't know, that have differences that, you know, and that sort of thing. And then he sobered up and he was upset with himself that he did this and which might give the idea that disability is a problem. But then it goes on to say he then became like the patron of these people making them special, then making them have a different category.

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Kisha Tracy: And but then also that translation is a 19th century, Colonial Western translation. So how much, we, there's just there's so many things that have to be gotten through as far as that's concerned. And then you get into interpretations from there. Just, think I use an example of an Aztec goddess who the, this version Chalchiuhtlicue, it's this statue that was found. And we have all of these back and forth of what the 18th, 19th century Europeans thought about this statue and they thought it was disfigured, It was had all of these other, they disabled this statue, when in reality it's like the goddess, like the, there's all kind, like it's a very famous goddess in, in Aztec culture that's like where the world was built and, all of this sort of thing had nothing to do with any of this interpretation of how this statue was looked at. So there's just, there's so much to think about.

And then just, gathering the text like, Epic of Sundiata from Mali. In Africa, that Japanese text that I mentioned there's Native American stories, pre-modern, pre-colonial stories that have all kinds of contexts, but they're an oral tradition. And so we have to deal with that as well.

And in a volume, like I'm thinking about as a companion, we need to be multimedia enough to be able to collect those kinds of things in oral tradition. So it's, yeah, the layers keep once you start, going through them and find the complications, but I think that the process is worth it and that we need to figure out how to bring enough people together who have this expertise to be able to look at this.

Kate Jewell (Host): That's very fascinating. And I know I've heard you say at many times there is a term for this large span of years that you do not use and that is the dark ages. And so I'm wondering how does this interest in medieval disability studies in a global perspective maybe relate to why you do not use that particular word or term?

Kisha Tracy: Yes. As you've heard me say, if I do nothing else, but get my students not to use the phrase dark ages for the rest of their lives, I will have accomplished something in life. But I, a lot of this has to do with the fact that there is this preconception of this time period that.

One has nothing going on, which is where a lot of that comes from, which all of the things I just said, that goes against all of that. And then two, the idea that it's always negative, right? Everybody had negative views, had negative experiences in this time period when that's never the case of any time period.

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Kisha Tracy: And when we look at all of these fascinating things that are happening across the world. It is just amazing what the richness of what is out there. Even if we get down to specific things like disability, like that's a, there's a pool of just fascinating works to take a look at.

And then on top of that just the word dark unto itself is something we have to question. And it goes along with calling Africa, the dark continent and that sort of idea where we are associating the word dark and that concept with negative types of issues. And pushing back against all of that is really necessary for many reasons. Not just because I don't like the phrase.

Kate Jewell (Host): I completely understand. And I very much appreciate your contributions to the field and to teaching. So where can we learn more about your work and about the global Medieval Disability Studies project?

Kisha Tracy: Absolutely. So I have a project called Cultural Heritage Through Image. And if you just do that search, you'll definitely come across that. And a lot of my work, but also my students' work is on that project and in a lot of different ideas, but especially the disability. There's a disability exhibition on there that is very useful. There's a National Humanities Center webinar series for which I did myth busting medieval disability. And so just searching for that National Humanities Center webinar series that I do recommend that one, it brings together all my ideas about how we need to myth bust medieval disability and definitely the source book.

Even though we need to do a lot of work in expanding it I, it is still a great place to start in terms of, medieval disability and experts in the field coming together. And while you're reading it, you can think about what else we need to expand and provide some ideas and thoughts of any avenues that we need to go for the future.

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Kate Jewell (Host): Fantastic. We will be sure to put some of those links in the show notes and we look forward to see what you do next, Professor Tracy.

Kisha Tracy: Thank you very much, Dr. Jewell.

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Tyler Lin: This is Tyler Lin, administrative assistant in the admissions office, and you're listening to *Perseverantia*, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

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