Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: On Being the Lone Medievalist Twice in One State

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In the classic Jacqueline Murray article, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages,” she argues that lesbians are challenging to reclaim in history by virtue of being doubly excluded. I’m not exactly comparing myself to a medieval lesbian, although a good deal of my scholarship has focused on female same-sex desire in the Middle Ages; however, there have been several instances of intertwined marginalization like this in my career. I was, for example, the only medieval PhD student at my institution. That brought both good and bad, since I got plum teaching assignments (no composition), but lost out on a student community. As a woman of color, I am also sometimes on the outskirts of medieval studies (although that is changing in today’s academic world), but have also been called a “race traitor” by other South Asians since I study “the whitest period in history” (a view also being challenged in today’s aca-

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demic world). So I guess one could say that I pretty much began my career as a Lone Medievalist in my PhD program, and have continued as such to this very day.

My first job was at Minot State University in Minot, ND. North Dakota is my home state, by the way, so I was happy to have a job only five hours away from my hometown of Fargo. When I arrived on campus in August 2000, I officially became the only medievalist in any discipline on the entire campus. In fact, there was one early modern specialist in the history department; otherwise, I pretty much represented all early British everything. Minot State is a regional four-year university with a 4/4 load and all the accompanying standards (heavy service expectation, focus on teaching excellence over scholarship, etc.), including a requirement that all tenure track faculty members teach two composition classes a semester. That left only two other classes to teach. As the resident linguist, I also taught grammar each fall and History of the English Language each spring, leaving precisely one chance at a medieval-like course each semester. Imagine my surprise, then, when two colleagues in particular—a creative writing specialist and a modernist who specialized in Ezra Pound—fought me tooth and nail for those classes, including HEL. This was pretty unusual behavior, or so I thought. Their reasoning was also unusual, “I took a class in Chaucer once from somebody famous,” and “but I really wanted to be a medievalist, so I should get to teach it.” My response was, “Well, I really wanted to be a physicist, too, but I’m not asking to teach Thermodynamics!” Those colleagues both complained directly to me and to the chair that I wouldn’t “come off” the early British classes, going so far as to say, “one little dissertation in anchoresses doesn’t make you a medievalist,” and “what gives you the right to teach those classes? Are degrees and publications really how we determine specialties?” (Seriously, these are direct quotes. I am not making this up.) Luckily the chair was just as confused by their comments as I was, and I was never forced to give up my early British courses.

I was amazed then, and continue to be amazed to some extent even now, at how many of my colleagues think that medieval lit-
erature is one of the subjects “everyone” should be able to teach. Sure, I’ll grant you that a class taught by me on Edgar Allen Poe might be better than one taught by the Biology professor, but it wouldn’t be as good as one taught by an Americanist. So that’s one thing about being a Lone Medievalist, at least in my experience. I think as medievalists we’re often “lone” because other people think they can somehow adequately cover our classes. (Similarly, I think those of us who specialize in Chaucer get hired more easily and quickly because search committees don’t know what else to look for, but that is a different issue altogether.)

Aside from these odd colleagues, I found being the lone medievalist both lonely and freeing. It was lonely academically, since no one really did any scholarship even remotely similar to mine. I went to MLA every year since I was constantly job-hunting, but MLA isn’t very medieval-friendly. My only true solace each year was Kalamazoo, where I could be all-medieval-all-the-time. To this day when I hear people say they want to skip Kalamazoo, I get defensive because where else would so many of us who are Lone Medievalists get to be, well, not alone? I would have enjoyed a writing group, but there wasn’t even a general one — and I was too tired to start one. I was already overextended by advising two student organizations, serving on numerous committees, being diversity chair, and founding a gender/women’s studies program.

You see, not only am I a medievalist, but also I am a feminist medievalist and a gender/queer theorist. I was, to paraphrase Murray, twice marginalized by profession. (I was also one of the very few persons of color on our faculty, hence the whole “diversity chair” thing.) But the bane of a small school can also be its blessing: a single individual can get more things done in a place like Minot State than at a larger institution. In Spring 2002, I began developing an interdisciplinary Gender/Women’s Studies Program, the first such program at Minot State University and the first program in North Dakota to include Gender alongside Women’s Studies. The program was approved by the State Board of Higher Education in 2003. I coordinated the program from its inception through my departure from Minot State in 2008.
The program had no money, no real tenure lines, no perks whatsoever, but I managed to get it done anyway. Because of this, I have the distinction of having taught the first course ever titled “Queer Theory” in North Dakota (or so the Registrar at Minot State told me then). I taught it at Minot State fall semester 2004. The reactions of people on campus were amazing, and of the 11 students in the class (eight women and three men), all but one lied to people about the title of the class. Several parents called me to complain (none were parents of my students, oddly enough). People in other departments on campus were horrified. Later, when I went up for promotion (and then for tenure the following year), I was asked by several people if I didn’t consider my scholarship and teaching “obscene.” And, because I am a medievalist as well as a gender theorist, I garnered the nickname “the Lesbian Goth Queen,” which I took in stride despite how it was meant. These sorts of things did, however, mark me as firmly being even more alone than just a “lone medievalist.” Ten years later, when I taught another Queer Theory course during the spring 2014 semester at UND and no one batted an eyelash, I felt like I had come full circle.

In August 2008, I accepted a position at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. It is the flagship university of the state and an RU/H: Research University (high research activity) in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (formerly known as R1 classification). We have an MA and a PhD program, and I am lucky to have graduate students and to teach only medieval-related courses (and of course some linguistics). On the other hand, I am still in many ways, a “lone medievalist.” I am the only medievalist in the English department. In fact, I am nearly the only medievalist on campus—there are, across all disciplines, only three other faculty members who would claim “medieval” as their specialty. Early Modernists fare better than that. Moreover, I am the only pure medievalist in an English department across the entire state, al-
though there are a few in other disciplines.² That’s 11 colleges and universities (excluding private and tribal institutions) all basically without a medievalist in their English department.³ I am truly a “lone medievalist” in many ways.

I’ve found I’ve had to make some choices. In my first job, at MSU, I was happy to double up as English and Gender Studies. I founded the whole program. It was a way to make my job better and to better the university’s environment. I was still the only medievalist on campus, but I was left more to my own devices. When I arrived at UND, however, I had to make a tougher choice. The Women Studies program⁴ was in the middle of being revamped and was seeking a new director. I applied. I thought that an R1 school would have more money and more resources, and be more open to expansion. I was indeed offered the position — under pretty much the same conditions I had been working at Minot State. The budget was minuscule (under $3000). The program was marginalized. There was no pay increase for me, only a course release. There was no support staff, place in the curriculum, or ephemera of any kind except a shabby office across campus. Additionally, I would have had to sacrifice all my medieval classes to teach only Women Studies courses and supervise any and all independent projects and capstones (how this equaled a course release, I’m not sure). I’m sure my scholarly endeavors in medieval studies would also have taken a back seat to administrative concerns. I had to turn it down. The dean was surprised, but I told her why I made my choice: if I wasn’t going to receive any visible support and was going to have to shoestring another program, it would be one in medieval studies. I actively chose to be a medievalist. That doesn’t mean I am

² There is technically one other, a Byzantine and Classics scholar who fills an official “medievalist” spot. Otherwise, there are none, or at least none that claim medieval.
³ When I arrived at Minot State in fall 2000, there were medievalists in the English departments at UND and NDSU, so I was one of three in the state.
⁴ Yes, the original name of the program was Women Studies, not Women’s Studies. There has been many a debate over that apostrophe-s. Now it is Women/Gender Studies.
not part of the Women/Gender Studies program. I am an affiliate and teach cross-listed courses; however, I remain focused on medieval language and literature since I define myself as a medievalist and feel it owns my heart and is owed my loyalty.

When I was at Minot State, and really alone even more than I am now, I considered things like founding the Gender/Women’s Studies program to be a “sanity saver.” If I was going to live in that campus environment on a permanent basis, I had to make changes in order to survive. I also felt that if I was not only the medievalist, but also the early British specialist in general, not to mention the linguist, I needed to legitimize myself in those areas. Therefore, I sought out opportunities to publish on early modern subjects and on pedagogy in order to be more relevant to my home campus environment. I pursued other avenues of connection, and brought Minot State into them. A major accomplishment in this area was bringing the journal *Medieval Feminist Forum* to our campus. It was an amazing opportunity for a small regional university. I had student interns (who were excited about the opportunity to get work published), support from the library, and even a one-course load reduction. The journal really brought recognition to my institution, and allowed me to network with a wide number of medieval scholars, making me feel less alone. Back in 1992, a group of scholars from South Dakota founded the Northern Plains Conference on Early British Literature. I began attending in 1993 while I was an MA student (not in either Dakota), and, as such, have forged friendships through the years with that group of scholars. When I rejoined the conference group as a new professor in 2000 I felt it was an ideal opportunity to incorporate Minot State into that community—a relationship that continues to this day despite my departure from the campus. To this day, I continue to attend that conference almost every year, cherishing the network of early British scholars across the northern Great Plains.

Now, while at UND, I still find these local connections to be very important. I attend the NPC and other local conferences, lectures, and events and bring my students to many as well so that we can all raise our medievalist identities. The refinement
of online writing tools has also allowed me to co-create a writing group with other medievalists in different areas of the country. The mere act of having these people in my life makes my “lone medievalist” status easier to bear. I know that even if I have no one on campus who is interested in reading my work, my group is—and they will be (virtually) available and be medieval. On the other hand, I now happily focus my own research primarily on medieval subjects. I no longer feel compelled to “beef up” my CV in other areas in order to legitimize my presence in the classroom. That isn’t to say that I no longer dabble, but I no longer feel obliged to do so. Instead, I dabble for enjoyment.

It is nice, in some ways, to be the lone medievalist. I can teach pretty much whatever I want. Although I am a Middle English scholar, I have a solid background in Old English and some in Old Norse, so I teach the entirety of the Middle Ages. Any graduate student who is interested in medieval language or literature works with me. I escape teaching composition because I teach linguistics courses. (Although the desire to moonlight as a medievalist is still present in some fellow professors, it does not seem to extend to linguistics classes. I, of course, do my own moonlighting as a linguist.) I have also found that by expanding my teaching into the realm of medievalism, I can capture a larger student presence, and subsequently interest them in “real” medieval courses. I still feel the strain of having to defend my profession and my choices. I approach scholarship and coursework differently than many colleagues. Medievalists aren’t afraid of footnotes. I allow and encourage use of Chicago style citations. I prefer secondary research over personal reflection in formal assignments. Overall, however, although it is sometimes a lonely position to be in, I have made peace with being the lone (English literature) medievalist of North Dakota.