The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist
Kisha G.Tracy, John P.Sexton

Published by Punctum Books

G.Tracy, Kisha and John P.Sexton.
The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66807

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2332141

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
A Lone Medievalist on the Island

Christine E. Kozikowski, The College of the Bahamas

Discovering a medieval French cloister in the Bahamas was one of the most surprising moments of my first semester of working at The College of the Bahamas (COB), where I thought I cornered the market on the Middle Ages. This fourteenth-century re-formed cloister and the talk given by William Whobrey from Yale was a reminder that the medievalist world is not so small. This closeness was also reminder of my scholarly identity in the midst of the complete and utter difference of my new situation at a college where I am the first and only medievalist. Transitioning from a large R1 university with active medieval programs in history, literature, Spanish, and French to a college whose programs focus on postcolonial Caribbean development was, while not unexpected, still a bit of a shock to my senses. My employment at COB has provided not only a number of unique experiences as faculty but it has also given me a new perspective on teaching medieval literature, as well as opportunities for research and development that would have never arisen if I weren’t a lone medievalist.

Perhaps best known in the United States for its reputation as a vacation destination, The Bahamas is part of the British Commonwealth, becoming independent in 1973. Its history is similar to many Caribbean nations, although it has the distinction of being the location where Columbus first landed; it was
settled by a variety of European imperial forces, Native Americans, freemen, and slaves, deeded to the British in 1717, and approximately 85% of the current population is descended from those first settlers. This historical past informs so much of the Bahamas’ present, not in the least because Bahamian independence from Britain was so recent, but also because of Bahamians’ desire to affirm their unique identity by distancing themselves from British rule and culture even as they see themselves as products of it—a traditional postcolonial dialectic.

It is with the past and present in mind that my perspective on teaching medieval literature has been most influenced. Although I was hired as a generalist, one of my main responsibilities is to teach the Early British Literature survey, a requirement for English and Education majors. I teach the usual suspects out of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which is the required text, with its predominantly white and male focus as subjects and authors. My students are eager and their knowledge of the Middle Ages comes mainly from what little bit they see on TV or in movies; like so many undergraduates, they are surprised to learn that medieval people did not think the earth was flat and unnerved by the imagery of Jesus as mother. In our class discussions, my students talked about race, class, and imperialism with an openness that my American students had been unable to achieve. Through their conversations with each other and with me about these topics, I began to wonder about the continued imperialism which occurs through labeling British literature “foundational” and my role in that as a medievalist.

Recent analyses of the study of the Middle Ages have seen rising trends in inclusivity and an emphasis on making the Middle Ages accessible and significant for any audience. But the question is how to do that when a month in my class and about a week in Western Civ are the only exposure to medieval literature, history, and culture most COB students will ever get. And how to make sure that my class isn’t just the literature of the conqueror, or of the expat teaching them, which becomes a challenge with a required anthology.
For my efforts, I worked to incorporate more lectures, readings, and discussions of topics that are of interest to my Bahamian students: colonialism, race, religion, population migration, slavery. Like most students, they want to connect to the literature they read and they want to picture characters in their minds that are similar to them. Therefore, conversations about Anglo-Saxon literature become conversations about race, migration, and slavery; *Gawain and the Green Knight* is now about female desire and gender stereotypes; Margery and Julian connect to Obeah and other Caribbean religious practices. Because of these adjustments, my students have enjoyed that the Middle Ages others the British, changing them from imperial colonizers into something different, something similar to their own historical identity. This critique of a shared European Middle Ages provides Bahamian students with a new way of understanding their own past as well as rooting them in that history. Moreover, it helps them understand their present differently since much of modern Bahamian society incorporates recognizable elements of the British medieval past.

In addition to teaching, I do all that I can demonstrate the importance of studying the Middle Ages. I recommend medievalists to invite for lectures; I apply for funding to research medieval topics; and I incorporate Caribbean culture into my research interests in order to provide a more critical connection between the past and the present. As the lone medievalist, it is my job to make sure that the Middle Ages doesn't become lost in the shuffle among disciplines. Because there is no medieval minor, program, or club (although I live in hope that there will be enough interest one day), I help with other programs because the more I get involved, the more potential I have to remind people that studying the Middle Ages is relevant.

In academia, we hold high the tenure-track job regardless of the recent arguments against it. Graduate students and faculty compete on the market for a shrinking number of opportunities and a growing number of temporary positions amidst fears of impermanence. Opportunities for working abroad may be scary to some, but I would recommend that those who are willing to
explore something new, to do something bold, that you take a chance. Living and teaching outside of one’s home country has unquestionable value, and it is a critical reminder of the importance of the diversity, acceptance, and challenge that being a lone medievalist entails.