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Interview of Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 00:00

And basically, I'm trying to kind of understand how people were producing knowledge about poverty and class in early America, and how that knowledge was circulating and informing people's sense of what the minimum was to survive.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:17

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths that they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. I am Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai, the director of research at the MHS. Today, we are sitting down with Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan, who is an Assistant Professor of History at Rutgers University and a recipient of the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship from the MHS. We are thrilled to have you here. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 00:56

I am the coordinator of public history at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and a 19th century social and legal historian focusing on poverty and punishment.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:09

Those are great topics. Perhaps there's something in your past that prompted you to study this in particular. Tell us a little bit about how and why you became an historian.

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 01:19

Yeah, I really became an historian because I wanted to be around documents themselves, not even so much interest in interpretation or narrative or storytelling, but paper. I grew up in a really old house that was really poorly insulated, and in the 1930s the residents of that house had filled the cracks of the walls and the basements with newspapers, and we were trying to improve the

insulation sometime in the early '90s, and I started pulling out pieces of paper and realizing there were incredible stories and images of what my hometown looked like in the 1930s and it completely changed my understanding of how I could relate to the past, both in place and also kind of understanding how people had lived differently. So that really got me interested in becoming an archivist, which was the first path that I followed. And once I started college and graduate school, I was completely bowled over by the fact that there were actual sources that told about people's experiences that would otherwise perhaps not have been part of the kind of traditional narrative. So, I come from a long line of poor people who have worked really, really hard, and I wasn't finding their stories in most sources, and so I tried to kind of think creatively about the archive as a concept and figure out how I could get to better understand their experiences.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:47
This is slightly different path to history that you fell in love with sources with material connection to the sources. Were there any teachers or books or anything along the way that also encouraged this love of history?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 03:01
Absolutely. I was really inspired by African American Women's historians in particular because I was trained by people who had been, you know, starting their professionalization of scholars in the '60s and '70s and so it was really a moment of, you know, people telling them, 'No, you can't find, you know, women's history. It's not in the sources. It's not there. No, you can't find records that tell us about the experiences of enslaved people.' And these scholars obviously proved that you could read intuitively and carefully and thoughtfully and, you know, against the archival grain in order to find those experiences, and so that really inspired me to try to do that with sources related to poverty. And of course, the work of Seth Rockman in Scraping By became, you know, the kind of example that I wanted to follow of kind of piecing together these disparate sources in order to construct a cohesive narrative out of something that would otherwise be almost impossible to get at.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:04

Millersville [University of Pennsylvania]? Did you know Robyn Davis?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 04:06

I did, yeah, absolutely, yeah. I did the first two years of college at Ursinus [College] outside of Philadelphia and then finished up at Millersville. And I don't think I took a course with Robyn, but I took courses with Tracey Weis , who actually introduced me to the free produce society and abolitionist women's efforts to do you know, kind of social economic boycotts of slave made goods that was it really kind of changed my whole approach to how, how I thought about people from the 19th century and what they could do, and how they saw themselves in relation to society, which changed then my perspective on what I could do. So, it was a really, really wonderful place to learn.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:54

But then you went and got your master's degree in Ireland and your PhD in the United Kingdom.

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 04:59

I did. I did, and that's actually because Tracey Weis, who I was doing my Bachelor's work with, I was writing my thesis on the free produce society, and she brought in Catherine Clinton, who was then at Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland. And, you know, they basically came and said, like, you know, I would do anything to study there I would, you know, Tracey said, 'I would leave my family, abandon them, quit my job, work in a bar, if it meant that I could live in Belfast.' This is incredible community, and Catherine pitched it to me as you know, you want to study a Civil War era. You should do that in a country that is still recovering from Civil War.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:38

Wow!

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 05:39

And it was a really incredible way to connect past and present in my daily life, thinking about like social and cultural division and war and resistance and how people articulated arguments for civil rights, and looking at how the Irish civil rights movement was influenced by African American civil rights movement in the US just really, really incredible place to study. And then once I was already in Ireland, I did some public history work, and worked with the Ulster Museum, the National Museums of Northern Ireland. So, then I just kind of got to know people who were doing, you know, US history, public history, museum studies in the UK and Ireland. And I thought, okay, this is a great place to do this. I'm going to kind of stick around and see what I can do.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:23
That's great. You also did this very quickly, five years?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 06:26
Yes, yeah, I don't necessarily recommend it. I was also working full time as an archivist for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. So, I wrote about 90% of my dissertation between the hours of 4 am and 8 am and it worked for me. It worked for me because I loved going into the archives in, you know, after having written, you know, half a chapter of a dissertation, and then answering reference requests from legislators who wanted to to know the historical precedent for bills that they were proposing, and to kind of be able to talk through that legal history kind of live with policymakers, was really energizing. So that kind of kept me going. It was a sprint.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:09
Right. Holy cow! What are some of the biggest challenges you say you faced becoming an historian?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 07:16
I think it's the topic, topics that I've chosen to work on are ones that there are people have a lot of preconceived notions about why people experience poverty and homelessness, which is what my first book was on vagrancy and the criminalization of homelessness in the early 19th century US, and how basically, mobility was a really kind of exclusive right or benefit that very few people

actually had in the letter of the law in early America. And I wanted to try to understand the actual like de facto implementation of poor laws and vagrancy laws, and how people experiencing poverty actually thought about the limitations that were placed upon them and how they how they got by, how they survived. And there's almost no records actually generated by these individuals themselves. Everything is mediated through the the lenses of, you know, Almshouse administrators and jail keepers and wardens and you know, kind of proto police officers, city watchmen. So, I can't trust them. So, I have almost no reliable narrators. I have to kind of read through all of these layers. So, I kind of envy sometimes people who write about like Thomas Jefferson, because they can just, you know, he wrote a lot. We can look at what he was saying. And I can't do that. So, I find that really, really challenging to feel as though I'm actually interpreting the situation faithfully. I try as hard as I can to kind of identify all of the perspectives that are going into creating these documents. And it helps, I think, to think like an archivist in this case, because in my first book, I was using a set of 1600 examinations of paupers, which were interviews that were conducted inside the Philadelphia almshouse between the 1820s and 1840s and it's a transcript of that interview written by the overseer of the poor. And there's a structure to them. He asks the same questions of everyone. And I started to realize, you know, there would be about five interviews in a row with white women, and then five interviews in a row with black women, and then five interviews in a row with white men and then black men. And I realized that he was carrying the book around with him, and it the order of the interviews matched the map that I had of the almshouse. So I knew he was walking down the hallway, going to each door and asking people to tell their story, and he would record everywhere they've lived, jobs they've held, how much they paid for rent, their families and sometimes other, you know, stories of like, you know, they walked all the way from Baltimore to New York City, right, like things like that. And so it really kind of even though that's mediated through his lens, it was the closest I could get. So it's both a challenge and a real opportunity to be able to kind of think creatively about how sources actually get produced, and then what is the relationship of the historical actor that I'm trying to understand that you know that this source is actually documenting.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:23

That's great. So think, like an archivist, most historians should probably have a don't have that training, and so I suppose there is this useful symbiosis between the two professions.

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 10:35

I think so. I think so, because it really opens up a lot of avenues for interpretation. For example, if you work on justices of the peace, or, you know, any records that they were generating in, you know, 18th and 19th century, they were people who generally didn't have an office. They worked out of their homes and on the go. And so very few of their records survive because they weren't kind of kept in a central repository. So, the ones that you do have, you kind of have to think of as, like mobile documents, right? That like these were being put into a saddle bag and carried around, right, or on somebody's person. And so, I think it's really useful to be able to treat the archival material you're using for analytical purposes also as material itself, and to try to understand the life cycle of the document. It opens up a lot of new avenues for me.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:33

You are a recipient of one of our fellowships. A wonderful project to us, I take it this is built off of your first book.

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 11:41

It is. Yeah, so my first book was on vagrancy, and most of the people who were arrested for vagrancy in the early American republic were arrested for having no visible means of subsistence, or things like wandering about the streets without a house or being idle and strolling. So, these are indigent transients, people who are both poor and mobile and don't necessarily have a claim to be in a particular community. They don't have legal settlement, which is kind of hard to get in some particular communities early 19th century. And I realized that the next kind of time period, if we think about means of subsistence, the only other kind of reference point that we have for what our means of subsistence is, when we get the federal poverty measure in 1966 right, when the federal government starts to try to, kind of say, 'All right, this is how much need there is, and here's how we can address it.' So, I started to realize, like, okay, poor relief has been a function of government

since the colonial era and, you know, early, early national period in the US. So, we know that there were people overseas, the poor, legislators, etc, who had a working concept of what they thought the means of subsistence required, the bare minimum kind of poverty line, whatever you needed in order to survive in early America. They had understandings of that. But it's not something that you can point to, right, that's that's kind of uniform across communities or across individuals. And so, I'm really trying to explore this like a slippery notion of the poverty line in the early republic period. Seeing how far I can, you know, stretch that up to the present. And basically, I'm trying to kind of understand how people were producing knowledge about poverty and class in early America, and how that knowledge was circulating and informing people's sense of what the minimum was to survive. So for example, one of the case studies I'm working with right now is on rent restraint, which is a legal remedy that landlords had access to in up until the mid-19th century and actually still in the present, in a couple of contemporary contexts, of like commercial leases that basically a landlord could if a tenant was behind on their rent payments, the landlord could go in and seize that tenant's goods and sell them in order to recover the costs of unpaid rent. And this obviously made it hard for a lot of people to get by if they were already struggling to pay their rent, this just made it harder. In a lot of cases, landlords were seizing implements of trade and the tools that you know, a shoemaker or a seamstress was using in order to actually earn money to pay their landlord, right? So, in the 1810s and '20s, a bunch of reformers in New York City got together and said, 'Okay, we recognize that there's a right of private property here, and these landlords have these abilities, but we need to protect these, this class of debtors, essentially, and say that landlords cannot seize implements of trade. They cannot seize one set of wearing apparel per household member. They cannot seize one teacup and teaspoon per member of the household.' So, they're really carving out a set of goods that comprise means of subsistence. And so, it's one of the ways that I've been able to kind of identify what the kind of working definitions of a poverty line in a material sense were in the early 19th century. And also, it's a real opportunity too similarly, again, thinking like an archivist, you know that the sources I've been using for that, the reason I started that line of inquiry on restraint is because I found, I found a single envelope of about 15 pieces of paper that were rent affidavits, landlord affidavits, from 1811 in New York City. And I found them at the New York State Archives in Albany. And so, I was talking to Jim Folts, who's the archivist, and he was like, I

don't think those belong here. I think they're supposed to be down in the court archives in the city. So basically, we played like, you know, archival scavenger hunt, and talked to a bunch of records managers in the New York court system and found the rest of these. There's more than 4000. It's an incredible document because each one tells you the landlord, the tenant, how much they paid in rent, how behind they were on their rent and their address, sometimes their occupation, sometimes their race, sometimes I can deduce their sex, and so then I can compare that to the city directories and the almshouses, and kind of triangulate these people, which is really valuable because it gives a sense of like how people were actually living outside of the almshouses, right? So, it removes a bit of that institutional layer that is so challenging to work through. So that's what I'm working with the new project.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 16:52
That's a bit of a challenge. There's a lot of information, but you seem to have mastered ways of finding all of this and connecting it all. Reconstruction, sharecropping, does that come up? That's what I'm thinking of.

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 17:07
Yeah, absolutely. There's some incredible work on this. I'm trying to remember the name of the historian, but somebody who has looked at crop liens, which are very similar to, right? It's a similar process, and the laws are definitely related. That basically is a version of, like, agricultural restraint.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:24
Yeah, that's what comes to mind. So what sources are you looking at here at the Massachusetts Historical Society?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 17:32
I have had such a wonderful time exploring the collections. I normally am researching in, you know, municipal archives and county clerk's offices. It's not normally such a well-appointed, beautiful space with such well-covered, well-handled and preserved documents. So I've been really excited to

be using the papers of some philanthropists from the 1820s, '30s, '40s in Boston, specifically Joseph Tuckerman, who was a Unitarian minister, who was one of the kind of pioneers of a sort of like urban missionary practice, where he basically acted as though he needed to assist in providing the kind of bare minimum means of subsistence for his constituents before he could expect them to sit down and listen to his religious or moral guidance. He figured, you know, I need to help you pay your rent, get some food on the table, and then we can have a conversation about God. So, he kept a record of a fund that he, you know, received donations from people who are part of various congregations that he was affiliated with, and then distributed that money. So he has a volume called his Poor's Purse, and in that he records, you know, brief conversations that he had with people experiencing poverty in Boston in the late 1820s and it's, it's a really remarkable source for kind of describing, you know, so and so was working at this job, and then got injured, and now they are, you know, they're off of work for a couple of months. They can't, they can't earn right now, and so they just need some help to get through for a couple of months. And so, I'm going to provide them with a quart of wood, right? And so, it's a really kind of detailed granular level of what what people needed, what they asked for, and what they received, which is really interesting to be able to, kind of like see that from the both sides. So, he has these kind of memoranda of families that he's providing aid to, which is really, really interesting to read. And there's kind of similar sources from William Jenks, who is also a minister working in Boston around the same time, and he, what's interesting about him is that he has the records of, you know, small amounts of relief that he was providing, but his household account book is also in the collection. So, I can see also what he was spending in his own house. So, I can see the amount of money he gave for food for, you know, the widow in his neighborhood, and then also what kind of food and how much he was buying for his own household. And so, it's really interesting to kind of compare conceptions of class across, you know, different social milieu.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:18

And how much is he spending on food versus how much he's giving? Tell us!

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 20:22

He gets a lot better at managing his household accounts after he's been married for a while but in the first few years, he's very in debt. He's like $200 in debt, and he hasn't paid his housekeeper in months. You know, around like 1800 he gets married in 1799 or so, and he's supposed to pay her $1 a week as a housekeeper, and he doesn't do that very often. You know, she eventually, eventually leaves, but she stays and puts up with him for quite a while.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:52
I think I know the answer to the next question, but maybe I do not. Some unexpected finds? The dream journal?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 21:01
The dream journal, absolutely. So, William Jenks, this, this guy whose household account books I've been looking at. He was an avid diarist, as was Joseph Tuckerman, you know, took incredible notes about his daily life and his nightly life. He kept a journal of his of his dreams, and he wrote about, you know, the kind of like religious allegories he was interpreting into the things that he saw in his dreams. And it's just really, it's really kind of incredible to see how he took he took it seriously as a reflection of what he was doing and thinking in his waking life that would influence what he was dreaming about, and then how he could kind of carry over the sort of like revelations from his dream life into his daily practice as a minister and as a person, is really fascinating. A 1790s 1800 dream journal. Remarkable!

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:55
That's great! Had you ever seen one before?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 21:57
No, no, I was shocked.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:01

Yeah, a good project for someone else out there and I know you're in the middle of this and you're still researching and thinking about writing and all that, but what would you like audiences to come away with this project once it's completed? What do you want them to understand about the past or perhaps the present?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 22:19

I do want people to be thinking about the fact that there is not a linear path to progress, that you know, it ebbs and flows. And you know some of the ideas that are proposed right now to solve crises of homelessness and poverty, people have tried many other things before. Some of them have worked and some of them haven't. And I've been following really closely the Supreme Court case that was heard in April, [City of] Grants Pass v. Johnson, which is exploring basically whether it is cruel and unusual punishment to arrest an unhoused person for sleeping outdoors in violation of like a camping statute if there's no alternative available to them. So, it's kind of testing whether or not that's a precedent that should be accepted. And I'm this topic is very close to my research because I'm I've seen the ways that homelessness has been criminalized, how people were arrested for sleeping outdoors in you know, the 1810s, 1820s, 1830s and that was 1000s of people every year in New York City and Philadelphia, and it's a really large population of people from the past that I study who were arrested and thrown in jail and then as soon as they were released, ended up right back in because punishing somebody for being poor does not help them get out of poverty. In fact, it usually makes it harder, and that is still true in the present. So, there are lots of solutions that social science researchers in the 21st century have identified that actually do decrease rates of houselessness, and none of those is a carceral solution. So, I do actually hope that we can kind of use some of these examples from the 19th century to help us better understand that people were creative then. They tried a lot of interesting responses to some of the same problems we're facing now, and some of them worked and some of them didn't. And we shouldn't just assume that the way we've been doing it the last 50 years is the only option available.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:22

Right, yeah, no, there's this understanding, or there's this belief that we know the best solutions and at the same time, people say, learn from the past. Well, this is an opportunity to do that.

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 24:34
Exactly.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:35
Is there anything else you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan 24:38
Only thank you for you know the fellowship opportunity. I mean, it's an incredible chance to get to talk with other people who are doing work sometimes that is close enough related that we're sharing sources. I was chatting with somebody in the lunchroom yesterday that we, you know, found this really interesting thing that will be useful for his book project he's working on, and also things I know nothing about to get to learn about, you know the history of the banjo with from a fellow who was here back in August. So, you know, thank you.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:05
[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan at Rutgers University, and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening and please rate, review and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.