

Disability History Association Podcast

Interview with Delia Steverson

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Caroline Lieffers: Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers, and it's my pleasure to be talking today with Dr. Delia Steverson. She's an Assistant Professor of African American literature at the University of Florida. Delia, thank you so much for joining me.

Delia Steverson: Thank you for having me, Caroline.

Caroline: First of all, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey to being a scholar of disability in literature?

Delia: I am an Assistant Professor at the University of Florida in the English department, and my work centers on African American literature and disability studies. I think that my journey to being a scholar of disability and literature really started in graduate school. I had taken all of these courses, really, I took from nineteenth-century British literature, to Irish literature, to African-American lit, to women studies, to all of these sorts of tasks. And it came to write a dissertation and I didn't know what I wanted to write on, and so my advisor, Dr. Trudier Harris, said, well, go back to all of these seminar papers and look at what you've been writing on. And come to find out I had been writing about disability subconsciously. I mean, I had written about Gerty in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, I had written about madness in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*. And so I realized that this was something I was interested in, but I didn't have that formal training yet. So I immediately got in touch with a professor in the Education department who, Dr. Nirmala Erevelles, and she agreed to do some directed readings with me, and then that's kind of how my journey to disability and literature came to be.

Caroline: That's amazing that you got to work with Dr. Erevelles.

Delia: Yes, she was amazing in terms of - just reading her work, her work has been fundamental in my own work as well, and just putting all of these different texts in front of me was extremely helpful. And that it's just a continuing education, you know, that you never know everything about either one of these fields, but I just took it upon myself to continue to educate myself and have Dr. Erevelles pushing me, to challenge me to think beyond what I thought I knew.

Caroline: Absolutely. I have to say we're breaking the rules a little bit by having a literature scholar on our history podcast, but I understand from my colleague, Sara Scalenghe, that you participated in the NEH institute that she organized a few summers ago that was about disability history. So tell me a little bit about that. What were some of the intersections that you found between what you do and what historians do?

Delia: Well, first of all, thank you, Caroline, for allowing me to be here and holding it

down for the literature scholars. But I think that I loved the NEH Summer Institute. It was really like being in graduate school on steroids, and I loved it. First of all, it was four weeks long, Sara was an amazing moderator and organizer, and we just had all of these amazing disability historians come. And I thought when I was applying that you had to be a disability historian, to partake in, in the Institute, but that was not the case. When I got there, there were other literature scholars, there were people in Critical Ethnic Studies, there were individuals in Deaf Education, others in literature, like myself. And during this time, we were able to learn so much about disability history. And that it took place in Gallaudet University in DC, and that was an amazing experience in terms of learning about Deaf Education history. We were able to go to the American Museum of History where Katherine Ott gave us some instructions on archival work there. We had guest speakers every single day from Douglas Baynton, to Aparna Nair, to Susan Burch, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder took us on a walk-through of the Holocaust Museum. It was just an incredible experience for someone with a literature background to be more fully trained in disability history and having more historical background to pull from in order to strengthen my own work.

Caroline: I read on your faculty webpage that you're working on a book that combines African-American literature and disability studies, so can you kind of just talk our audience through some of the examples and issues that you think are going to feature in your book?

Delia: Sure! So my book centers really on the argument that the Black body since its inception in the Western world has been constructed as inherently disabled. And through surveying African-American literature, I start from the nineteenth century with slave narratives up into the twentieth century with the work of Adrienne Kennedy. And I emphasize theories of embodiment to highlight the ways that African-American authors construct textual bodies to illustrate abstract concepts like ableism and racism. And what I mean by that is to suggest that the ways in which the narratives about race and disability are constructed historically, both subconsciously and consciously affect, I argue, how African-American authors consider notions of Black identity in their works. And I do this by looking at key structural systems where Black and/or disabled bodies are exchanged, commodified, or subject to state-sanctioned violence. And all of this, I, I argue, is under this rhetoric of care, you know, this paternalist attitude of care. So, for instance, in one of the chapters that I'm working on, I'm interested in Black disabled war veterans. And I think that, actually, the work that I did at the NEH Summer Institute where John Kinder came and talked a lot about war veterans really helped to solidify the historical background of the argument that I was making in this chapter.

So in this chapter, I'm looking at a novel and a play, Tony Morrison's *Sula*, which you may be familiar with, Caroline, in 1973. And August Wilson's play, *Fences*. And I use a historical lens in order to demonstrate what's happening in these texts, right? Because these texts are not created in a vacuum, and I really think that how African-American authors think about Blackness, how they construct Blackness, is either subconsciously or consciously through this idea of what disability means. And it's not as much to say that just disability, it's not, "The Black body is disabled." It's not that simple.

Caroline: Can you tell me more about Tony Morrison's *Sula*?

Delia: Yeah, so *Sula* is Morrison's second novel and it tells the story of friendship, love, betrayal, growth between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, both are these young women who live in this place called "The Bottom," and that's a small, tight-knit Black community in Medallion, Ohio. The novel at the same time illuminates a circular history of the town and its inhabitants while they're confronting these hardships and tragedies over decades, but also pursuing communal healing and survival. Along the way we have this array and lively cast of characters who anchor the novel, including Shadrack, and that is the character whom my chapter centers. He is this World War I veteran who becomes so traumatized after witnessing so much violence and death in France, that he comes back to The Bottom and institutes "National Suicide Day." And that becomes a national holiday for the residents. And he institutes this day just so he can attempt to control the uncertainty of death. He becomes this pariah in the community, and the townspeople call him "energetically mad." But after he experiences someone's head getting blown off in front of him, the reader doesn't know exactly what happens after this incident. All the reader knows is that Shadrack wakes up in this hospital bed where this nurse or attendant is standing over him yelling at him to pick up his spoon and eat some really unappetizing food that's on his plate. As you can imagine, he gets a little scared and ends up having a behavior outburst that confines him to a straightjacket. Mind you, he has no idea where he is or why he is there. So fast forward - one day because the hospital has run out of space, Shadrack is kicked out of the hospital because he was deemed violent, because of this earlier episode. And they send him on his way with about 200 bucks, some clothes, and of course, nowhere to go. There he wanders around, buys some liquor, ends up getting drunk, and then the police imprison him for vagrancy and intoxication.

So, that's kind of his trajectory in the book and my chapter situates Shadrack's plight in a historical as well as an ethical and socio-cultural context to emphasize the challenges that Black war veterans faced when transitioning from soldiers and civilians. So, let's think about the time period. Under programs like the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, federal and state governments began to provide benefits and especially rehabilitation programs to disabled veterans. And even though during the 1920s, yeah, there was much conflict over the meaning of disability, but disabled war veterans were given this special disability status. So this was the, we're talking Progressive Era, so the goal was to rehabilitate these disabled veterans to become productive citizens upon reentry into society. But of course, everyone isn't salvageable. For instance, people showing signs of psychological distress, because it was thought that was easy to fake, and especially Black people too, who because of these misconceptions about race were said to be genetically predisposed to certain ailments which would place them in this line of undeserving of care, undeserving of rehabilitation. So although these US newspapers would present images of rehabilitation facilities and ads from the Red Cross would be advocated this good at restoring these brave individuals who fought so desperately for the United States, experiences like Shadrack then demonstrate for the Black disabled veteran, this simply was not the case. I mean, imagine African American men, who go off to fight in war and say, surely by putting our lives on the line abroad for a country that persecutes me, then when I come back home this will definitely lead to more social justice. But as they come to find out, and as the, the situation at home was much bleaker. So in Shadrack's case, where his psychological distress as a Black man was read by the nurse or attendant and the policeman as violent, these instances, although unjust, of course, served to legitimate his imprisonment rather than his

rehabilitation. So in this instance, and with all of my other chapters, I really seek to tease out the ways in which race and disability intertwine in all of these multifaceted ways.

Caroline: That's super interesting. I can absolutely see that your book, although about literature, is going to be incredibly useful for historians. One of the books I especially want to talk to you about though, is Delores Phillips's novel, *The Darkest Child*. So that was published, if I'm correct about this, in 2004. For people who haven't read it, can you tell them just a little bit about what is this novel and what's it about?

Delia: Yeah, so this novel, *The Darkest Child* came out in 2004 by a, a rather unknown author by the name of Delores Phillips, and the novel is set in the late 1950s, 1958 in Georgia, and it follows this tyrannical mom by the name of Rozelle - she's called Rosie - and her ten children as they try to go through the hardships of the Jim Crow South. It's really set, it's a really dark book, and I think Delores Phillips talks about the way that it's a dark book. It's about how Rozelle is this mother who the narrator calls mad at times, calls crazy, and she's particularly abusive to almost all of her children. She puts the, she's a Black mom, she puts her children into these categories: she has the light-skinned children, she has the medium brown-skinned children, and she has the dark-skinned children, and you can imagine she treats the dark-skinned children worse than she does the light-skinned children, because she sees that they have more value. And so these kids are trying not only to survive in the Jim Crow South, Georgia, but also trying to survive in this really abusive home with Rozelle.

Caroline: So one of, you just mentioned that Rozelle, the mother, has mental illness of some kind, although it's not really specific what it is, and then one of the daughters, Martha Jean, is deaf, and she uses home sign to communicate with her family. So, do you think that the way that Phillips is using disability and her novel is significant or surprising? What are your thoughts on that?

Delia: Oh, absolutely. I think Phillips is doing something quite novel with her conceptions of disability. Here is an instance where I think we get, one of the only, well, to my knowledge, characterization of a Black deaf character in African American literature that is not just a stereotype. I think to understand, though, the complexities of how Martha Jean is constructed in the novel, it's important to consider other representations of deafness in African American literature. You know, there are examples of deafness as a metaphor, you know, for example, "my words fall on deaf ears," and the like. But in African-American literature deaf characters themselves are a little bit more sparse. For instance, in "Kabnis" in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, there's this character by the name of Father John who is deaf, blind, and old, but is able to see and hear things that the main character Ralph can't. Or, for instance, there's Uncle Isaac in Raymond Andrews's *Appalachee Red* who is also deaf and blind. And he's just this stock character who makes a brief appearance as a local personality in this bar where much of the novel takes place. There's also a character in Adrienne Kennedy's play *She Talks to Beethoven*. The protagonist Suzanne Alexander is ill in Ghana and she's struggling with writer's block. She then is visited by the musician, Beethoven, who, after a conversation with Suzanne, reveals to her that he is deaf and that in order to communicate they must communicate via notebook. And it's through this

writing of the notebook she overcomes her writer's block. So then deafness in this case becomes what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder label this "narrative prosthetic," which is a literary technique in which disability is used to propel the narrative forward.

But Martha Jean, on the other hand, is not a stereotype or an underdeveloped character. Her deafness isn't seen as a type of moral authority, like Father John in *Cane*, or a one-dimensional comedy like Uncle Isaac in Raymond's book, or a narrative prosthetic like Kennedy's play. But, she's more fully fleshed out. And her mother, though, ascribes to the narrative that deaf people are a burden on society. And as I said before, that Rozelle places her children in a hierarchy, and Martha Jean is one of the lighter-skinned children, but she treats her horribly. She calls her useless, she calls her a dummy. She doesn't let her to leave the house, except occasionally to the post office or to go to church. And she basically becomes this indentured servant in the house. She makes Rozelle, Rozelle makes her cook and clean, and she also makes her take care of these babies that Rozelle keeps having. Rozelle tortures her, basically. So Phillips is doing something essentially, what I would say, taboo in a lot of African American literature, kind of similar to what Toni Morrison did in *The Bluest Eye*, where she's exposing violence within the Black home as well as outside of the Black home. So although Rozelle, you know, insists that Martha Jean must stay at home because she can't learn, and she even scolds her other children when they try to teach her anything. And to put this in a historical context, we want to think about how many Black deaf children like Junius Wilson, Mary Herring Wright were often sent off to these segregated schools to learn vocational skills. But in Phillips's text, she imagining what it could have been like for a Black deaf child who did not receive a traditional education, for a Black deaf child devoid of a deaf community in the rural South.

So while her deafness leaves her extremely vulnerable at times, it also oddly protects her. So, like, for example, Rozelle pimps out her young girl children to these local white patrons at this place called "the Farmhouse," where the girls are violently raped. But Martha Jean, because Rozelle sees her as undesirable, is not subject to the same fate. At the same time, though, you do see, we see in the novel that Martha Jean learns her own form of communication. In fact, her other siblings including Tangy Mae, who's the protagonist of the novel, work with Martha Jean and create their own form of amazing sign language. They also teach her to read. They even use certain signs to teach Martha Jean how to read their mother's hostile body language. When the kids are among hearing people, they make sure to sign to Martha Jean so that she gets, she feels included in the conversation.

What's interesting about Martha Jean's position in the novel, is that she is really the only child, as she grows up, who basically achieves what Rozelle and even Tangy Mae, maybe to a certain extent, couldn't. So this care work that she was forced to do while in Rozelle's home transforms into something much different when she meets, she meets and actually marries the local post office boy, whose name is Velman Cooper, and it's really cool because they create their own form of sign language as well. So, she mothers two children and she learns, she raises them with kindness and love. She escapes her mother's grasp, embracing the care work and labor that she finally does on her own terms. So the things that her mother couldn't achieve, like a successful marriage, financial stability, a loving household, Martha Jean achieves. And her character also complicates the idea of labor dynamics in the South - speaking of, especially child labor - about who can do what kind of work and what kind of work is

considered valuable. Her deafness, it isn't erased, and she is a fabric of the Quinn household.

Caroline: Really interesting. Let's actually talk a little bit more about Phillips. I mean, as a historian, I always want to get at the ways that novels illuminate stories of individuals or help us better understand certain times and places, and I think for that we need to actually think about who Delores Phillips, the author, was, because she seems to have this extraordinary, rich and sensitive understanding of the experiences of children in the Jim Crow South. So tell me about Delores Phillips.

Delia: Yeah, so Delores Phillips was born in Cartersville, Georgia, which is a little bit northwest of Atlanta in the 19, in 1950. She was the second of four children - her older sister, Linda Miller, which is her best friend, and her younger, she had two younger brothers as well, Skip and Gregory. They grew up in Cartersville, Georgia, but they also moved back and forth from Detroit, I mean, from Cartersville, Georgia to Detroit. And what's interesting about this is that in the 1950s, we have kind of these remnants of the Great Migration of African Americans, and Delores Phillips's father was a part of this Great Migration. He was a bricklayer and he wanted to get away from the South, and the way that he did that was finding work in Detroit, so the family would often go back and forth from Cartersville, Georgia to Detroit. And so then, they're growing up in Cartersville, Georgia. What's interesting also is that her mother, Annie Ruth Banks, was also an avid writer and reader, and Linda Miller told me that their mother would read to them every single night, and Annie Ruth actually published a poem in *True Romance* magazine and was paid twenty-five dollars for that. And that was around the 1950s, I think, when she actually published that, and unfortunately, I haven't been able to find it yet, but I'm looking for this poem by Annie Ruth Banks.

So the family, Phillips's father dies early from hemophilia and some years pass, she goes into the army for about three months, but she doesn't like the army because she says it's too strict. Then she moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where she spends really the rest of her life. And that's where she begins working as a licensed practical nurse, working with the Cleveland Psychological Institute. She works at a nursing home, she works at a women's shelter called Women Together, which is now the Center for Prevention of Domestic Violence. And it is during her time as an LPN that she gets inspiration for a lot of the characters in *The Darkest Child*.

Caroline: Do you see connections between what happened in her life and then what shows up in her writing?

Delia: Yes, I think so. Phillips had chronic illness, which included multiple sclerosis, something that had an impact on her from the time of her diagnosis in '98 to the time of her death from cancer in 2014. So, I think the way she thought about what it means to be ill, or in pain, or sick, or even just tired, coupled with her extensive career as an LPN, especially working at the, with battered women and children really intertwined in a way to make her writing style so beautiful and her character construction so unique.

Caroline: Absolutely, yeah.

Delia: So Linda told me the story of how *The Darkest Child* came to fruition. The novel actually started out as this 500-page rhyming poem called "Gussie Mae Potts," which apparently she had written on for at least a decade. And her daughter, Shalana would remember Phillips reading parts of the poem to her at night. And unfortunately we haven't been able to locate this notebook where this amazing rhyming poem was. But anyway, around 2000, Phillips wanted to try her hand at novel writing and decided to turn the poem into what we have today, *The Darkest Child*. And that transition took about a year. She wrote it between 2000 and 2001. I believe the manuscript ended up being over 800 pages and the editor told her she had to cut out about 500 pages. And what's interesting is that Linda made a note to say that Gussie Mae Potts, who I, who we believe eventually became Rozelle in the novel, didn't actually show up until Phillips began working at the Psychological Institute. But Rozelle, as Linda says, isn't just based on one individual, but rather an amalgam of patients she cared for while working as an LPN. And in fact, during this interview at Albany State, where she was a writer in residence, she says that she was careful not to give Rozelle a diagnosis. I think she says something along the lines of, I'm not going to give her a diagnosis now, because we as Black people didn't give diagnoses back then, we'd just say they were crazy, but they were still, you know, fabric in the community. And even though that word choice may be unfavorable, I think that refusing to officially diagnose Rozelle really fights against this medicalization of mental difference. So, the book isn't about, it's not about diagnoses. Rather it's about imagining life for multiple folx with bodily and mental differences fighting against rampant anti-Blackness and ableism. So, she basically said, hey if the reader needs a diagnosis, then let them decide for themselves.

Martha Jean, on the other hand, was probably inspired by Shalana's interest in Deaf education. Shalana became interested in sign language when she was young, basically, she said, out of the blue, and she just went on to learn sign language and she ended up getting a degree in Deaf education. And Phillips would watch Shalana sign and her interest was soon piqued as well. In fact, she herself learned sign language because, as Phillips said in the interview, she wanted to communicate with Martha Jean. And in her archive is a sign language book. I think it's called *A Basic Course in American Sign Language*, or something like that, and what's neat about the book is that Phillips has written notes on many of the images inside the book. So we're getting to see how she is, really, being extremely careful and also intentional about her creation of Martha Jean in the novel.

Caroline: Wow, that's really, really interesting. You've now mentioned a couple of times that you've had access to Delores Phillips's archive and actually been in touch with some of her family members, which is incredible. Can you tell me a little bit about this process of actually meeting her family and getting access to the archive? What was that like for you?

Delia: Yes, so I was, when I read this book for the first time, actually, one of my good friends said, Delia, you need to read this book. It's got so many instances of disability in there. I read it when I was in graduate school, and I immediately fell in love with it. And I wanted to write about it in my book, and so as I was doing this research, she was, Delores Phillips was like an enigma; I couldn't find anything about her. And so I started doing as much research as I could. I then, I contacted Soho Press, which published the book. And of course, they can't give you, you know, the sister's names

or or personal information, but I was able to find an obituary online of Delores Phillips, and what I did was I wanted to get in contact with her sister. But her sister - I couldn't find any contact information, so I contacted the daughter, Shalana Harris, via Facebook. And I didn't know if she would respond or not, but she was very excited that someone was interested in her mother. And so she gave me her Auntie, Linda Miller's, Delores's sister's, number, and I got in touch with Linda Miller, and we just talked and just talked and talked and talked. And it was really like a godsend, because these people treated me like family. I ended up going to Cleveland, meeting with Miss Linda, meeting with Shalana, meeting with Delores's brother Gregory. And they had all of Delores's documents, works, diaries, unpublished works, in boxes. And so we, what we did, we went over these boxes together, and at the same time we're interviewing, they're telling me more information and they're pulling out more, more texts, or they're telling me different stories. And so the archive really became this living archive with these individuals who knew her best, even though I was unable to interview Delores Phillips - she died in 2014 - that these individuals are keeping her alive. So to me, they're, they're a live archive. [**Caroline:** Wow] And I've just been truly blessed to be able to do this process. This was my first time doing anything like a biography, and I like to say that I'm an honorary historian [**Caroline:** Exactly] from the work that I've been doing here. And these individuals have just been so helpful in, in opening up their lives and their mother to me, and their sister to me, you know, telling me the good, the bad, the ugly, all of these sorts of things, and just allowing me to paint a complex picture of this amazing woman who seemed to have written just one book and left us with this.

Caroline: Can you tell us more about some of the unpublished writing that you've discovered?

Delia: The archive has been a tremendous find. It's important to note here that Delores Phillips was actually a poet first. As I mentioned previously, she would read to her daughter Shalana, but she also read poetry to Linda and to her younger brother Gregory. She would write these poems on notebooks, but there are also several poems where she seemed to have written on a word processor, which are unpublished. One's about smoking, one's about sisterhood, and others of the like. But she does have poetry that was published. She's published in *Jean's Journal* and *The Black Times*, but so far, I've been searching for the past year and been unable to find those two. However, there is one poem that is publicly available, and you can actually Google it. It's called "Forgive me Child." It was published in 1975 in *The Crisis* magazine, which you may know is the magazine of the NAACP. Yet she did not publish this poem under the name we know her now, which is Delores Phillips. She published it under Faye Miller Knox. Faye being her middle name, Miller being her father's name, and Knox, the name of her first husband. So, who knows, maybe the poems in the other two journals are listed under some permutation of her name. So my research assistant Ashley and I are actively on the hunt for those.

Also in the archive are a few short stories, as well as several hundred pages from what is the sequel to *The Darkest Child*, which you can actually read an excerpt from the sequel in the 2018 edition of the novel, called *Stumbling Blocks*. The third novel is the last in the trilogy, but I don't think it has a name. And, currently, Ashley and I, my research assistant, are trying to piece together these hundreds of pages of writing to see if anything had actually been completed.

She, her sister, Linda Miller is a writer in her own right, and Linda was a lot of the time, really an editor for Delores Phillips. In the archive, I found how Delores, when she went to school at Tri-C Community, which is Cuyahoga Community College, and then later transferred to Cleveland State University, Linda provided a lot of feedback for Delores Phillips's work. Delores was an English major, and in the archive, I have several of her English papers, and you see her notes to Linda Miller, and you see Linda writing, good job Faye, oh my goodness, this person is, this character is mean, isn't she? And it's just this beautiful conversation between these two sisters over the creation of this text. And, and Linda and Delores actually were co-authoring another story, which I just kinda titled "Night Bloom," but it's unfinished. So Linda Miller was very instrumental in Delores Phillips's development as an author.

Caroline: That's really neat. Is there any chance that this archive is going to become publicly available? Is the family interested in depositing it at a university or something like that, or are they keeping it within the family right now?

Delia: Well, at the moment, it's in the family, but the family is very interested in making the archive available. We're working on a reader of Delores's, of Delores Phillips's unpublished works, which will include several of the poems and short stories and perhaps other parts of the novel and hopefully, that combined, that joint short story with Linda and Delores.

Caroline: Do you think that what Philips has to say in *The Darkest Child* is useful for historians, right? I'm thinking about how when I read this book, it really deepened my understanding of the Jim Crow South, it deepened my understanding of how disability might be understood by people who experienced that time. In what ways do you think this novel could potentially speak to people who are interested in history or culture and deepen their understanding of disability and race?

Delia: I think that, first of all, any piece of literature is useful to historians. I think that literature is so much a part of history and history, you know, that those two go hand-in-hand. I think particularly with *The Darkest Child*, it personalizes this experience of, an experience of living poor, Black, as a child, in all of these, in all of these different realms that were, literally, you weren't supposed to survive. And I think that this is part of our history, that people - like what happened to, for instance, Black deaf individuals that were children who did, who weren't shipped, who didn't get to go to school? Who didn't go to schools like Mary Herring Wright went to? You know? What would their lives have looked like? How do we get to that archival work? You know, what does it look like? And yes, this is a work of fiction, but it helps to imagine or think through what these experiences may have looked like for those who may have fallen through the cracks.

Caroline: Yeah, no, that's exactly it. One of the things that I found so interesting about this book - the town itself, it becomes like this sickening place in a way. It's almost like it has this hold on the family, and they keep getting pulled back into it. You know, the oldest sister talks about, like, she tries to get away, she lives in Ohio for a while and she comes back, and it's almost like the town, or the Jim Crow South itself has this negative impact on all of their health.

Delia: Yeah, absolutely, and I think you're onto a good point, Caroline, because a point that I stress in my book is that racism and ableism do have material consequences on individuals who inhabit these intersections. I think a good example of how deleterious the effects of racism and ableism has on Black psyches is to go back to Adrienne Kennedy's work, to a play entitled *The Ohio State Murders*. The main character Suzanne is recalling her college years at the Ohio State University, where she experiences so much psychological and physical trauma trying to navigate the racist, ableist, sexist environment that is Ohio State, and becomes so consumed with this threat of violence that it causes her corporeal pain. Even to the point where she was curling her hair so tight that she was making her scalp bleed. Because of this she goes to the health center, and this white intern examines her head, but he doesn't actually want to touch her at the same time. And he just concludes that she's just been putting the curlers in too tightly. And he basically says, "there is no problem, you're just putting these curlers in too tightly." And the problem is, he doesn't see beyond just trying to treat her scalp, as opposed to seeing that the physical is a manifestation of this psychological trauma which she's having to endure as this college student at Ohio State. So basically like, what's the point? The point is that oftentimes pain, violence, impairment, and even disability can be written on the Black body in really complex ways, so that looking at African American literature through a critical disability studies lens really requires us to reconsider what we mean when we use the term disability. And I think Sami Schalk says it beautifully in her book *Bodyminds Reimagined*, where we must expand our idea to include not just disability and impairment, but chronic illness, sickness, trauma, all of these. And how does considering then Blackness and disability in African American literature, how can that help us to expand work that we're doing in all of these fields that are related to those.

Caroline: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Just to expand on this, I guess, a little bit, I understand that you teach courses on disability studies and also disability and literature, and have you found that students are receptive to or excited by the possibilities in those disciplines, right? And these different approaches and ways of thinking about people and texts?

Delia: I think that I've kind of done a couple of things when I'm teaching disability and literature, which I like to do what I'm teaching sometimes. Like I'll put certain words in the title of the, of the course, right, so I'll have one that might be race and disability, and then I'll just have one that I, I just might say Black subject in nineteenth century, in the nineteenth century. But that, they both might be centered on the relationship between race and disability. I've found that, and this has changed actually over time, that at first, when I first started teaching, when I was in graduate school, that students weren't really getting it. I think that my students now, they might be hesitant to seeing that word being in the title, which I think is interesting - I actually want to, I want to talk about that in my classes anyway, you know, like, why do you pick the classes that you pick. But a lot of times they come in the class and they say, okay, this is about race and disability, and they're like, I'm interested in the race, but not necessarily about the disability part, because I'm not disabled, you know. And so trying to get them to think about disability affects all of us. And I think now, especially with the times that are happening now, in these times, that disability work, especially in, in the humanities, is extremely vital. And I believe that students these days see that as something that is vital, and I believe that that is shown with this course that I co-teach, actually with a historian actually in the history of

Department here at University of Florida, Steve Noll and I teach this course called Race and Disability in History and Literature, and students have really responded well to this course, they love it. And what Dr. Noll does is he sets generally the historical background of the times in which we are discussing, and then I will add a literature piece to further pick through these nuances of race and disability. So, we're speaking at these intersections based upon the work that we do. So I think that students are very interested in this work.

Caroline: That sounds like an incredible class. I wish I could sit in on it. [**Delia:** You should come.] Yeah. What are some of the text, either novels or scholars' books - secondary sources, that you would recommend for historians who are really interested in thinking more about kind of, the cultural aspects of their work? So either literature from the past or literature about the past, that really will help deepen their understanding of the connections between race and disability and literature? What would you recommend?

Delia: Yes, I think that there's so much work out there. Of course, I think, first of all, slave narratives are a wonderful place to start in thinking about the relationship between race and disability and how Black bodies were maimed, tortured, impaired, and how at the same time, Black authors used their bodies in order to subvert these, the slave system, albeit if only temporarily, right? And neo-slave narratives, which are fascinating because they connect history, the past, trauma also to disability, so you're talking about Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*, and also, if you're in to Octavia Butler, I really think, as I've said previously, Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined*.

In terms of deafness and literature, which I have used a lot in order to help me with my own work, Christopher Krentz has *Writing Deafness*, which is nineteenth century, and discusses the ways in which mostly male authors define what they call, what he labels as the hearing line. Also, I think if you're a fan of W.E.B. DuBois, he has this wonderful poem that I love to teach. It's called "On Being Crazy," and it's this poem, poem that really asks, is it crazy to want to be equal here as a Black person? Am I crazy to want to go to a restaurant and not have to sit at a certain, for colored people? Is, am I crazy to do that? So I think thinking about this idea of mental health and Blackness, W.E.B. DuBois's works. Also, I just love Flannery O'Connor. I mean, disability instances are everywhere in Flannery O'Connor. And other scholars who are doing the work as I'm doing, of course, Nirmala Erelles, Cynthia Wu, Julie Minich, Dennis Tyler, all of these individuals as well.

Caroline: Thank you so much, I'm sure there are many others that we couldn't even mention because we'd run out of time, but thank you so much, Delia, for just sharing your wisdom. It has been such a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you.

Delia: Thank you, Caroline. It's been a pleasure to be here.

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Caroline: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!

