

**Disability History Association Podcast
Interview with Ryan Lee Cartwright
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Kelsey Henry: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. I'm Kelsey Henry and it's my pleasure today to be in conversation with Dr. Ryan Lee Cartwright. Ryan Lee is an Assistant Professor of American Studies at UC Davis. His research focuses on disability, gender and sexuality on the social and spatial margins and he teaches courses on a number of different topics, including disability studies, queer and trans history, social welfare, the 1990s, and landscapes and places. Ryan Lee, thank you so much for joining us today.

Ryan Lee Cartwright: Thank you so much for having me, I'm glad to be here.

Kelsey: So I'm going to start with a question that we love to ask everyone who comes on the podcast, mostly because the stories are so individual. Can you start by telling us about how you got here, so your path to disability studies and disability history. Did you come into academia with the expectation that this is where you would land? Or has your positioning in disability history surprised you?

Ryan Lee: I think my story is probably similar to many people's story in that my path to disability studies and disability history sort of ran parallel to my own experience, personal experiences with disability. So, as an undergraduate I was majoring in sociology and for my research a professor recommended that I look at eugenic family studies. So that was the first time I started doing history, because those are from the 1910s, and it was also, you know, disability was very much a part of that.

Ryan Lee: And so, with specific chapters of my dissertation I would be looking at disability. But I really, I didn't have any classes in disability studies or advisors who focused on disability, in either undergrad or grad school, but I became sort of undeniably disabled at the end of college. And so, then that, as I sort of grappled with that more through grad school I was reading a lot of disability studies on my own, and that became more central to my work. In the dissertation I analyze disability in different places, but it wasn't part of the overall framework. And then as I revised that to be this book disability became much more central. It was there all along, but I pulled out the threads and it became much more central, because by then I'd had a number of years of being in disability community, and you know reading and participating in disability studies and disability history and had a better ability to you know make that part of the framework overall.

Kelsey: An arrival at disability, history or disability studies often is this collision point between the personal and the political and the professional and it deepens over time. I'm so glad that I got to witness at least one of the places that you landed - this book, *Peculiar Places*. Which has such a deep and rich disability history analysis and it's really beautiful to think about how that depth grew over time, not only because of what you were reading, but because of the communities that you were in and what felt urgent to you personally, as well.

Kelsey: So in late 2021 you published a book called *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity* with University of Chicago Press. And I had the great

pleasure of reading it congratulations for publishing it, it was such, such a fantastic book. And you read landscapes of perverse white rural poverty and spectacularized figures of white rural impoverishment. So some of the figures that you're thinking with are - and I say "degenerate" in quotes, these are historical terms that were used at the time - "degenerate" white families in early 20th century eugenic family studies, murderous and "sexually backward" brothers, the feminine reclusive bachelor, just to name a few. And you're really looking at places and people that were crafted and maligned in news media, in horror films for the American public, in documentary photography, and you're looking at these figures, these places, and these people through the lens of disability history and queer history. And I'm wondering, you kind of already mentioned that this came out of your dissertation project or some version of the dissertation project, but how did you arrive at *Peculiar Places*? How did the project grow and change over time from the book project and the dissertation that you wrote initially?

Ryan Lee: So yeah, the book did emerge out of my dissertation. So the bulk of the research is drawn from the dissertation. I added two chapters and a lot of research for third chapter, so the chapter on the War on Poverty and the poverty tours in the 1960s was a new chapter. The chapter on hate crimes documentaries in the 1990s, that was a new chapter. And then the chapter on Ed Gein who was a Wisconsin farmer and murderer in the 1950s - he is also the person that all kinds of characters, such as Leather Face from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Buffalo Bill from *Silence of the Lambs*, all of these characters that are purportedly "crazy" and purportedly trans in some way are based on this story of Ed Gein. So for the book, I was able to do research with the actual court records and things like that, so I did a lot of research, completely rewrote that chapter. And also, you know, given how vexed it was, you know, wanted to be very careful about how I wrote about it. And then, in terms of the framework, I fleshed out the idea of queer crip history and figured out how the mundane sort of fit into that. I know we'll talk about - we'll unpack some of those words later, so I don't want to do too much of that now, but I'll just leave that for now.

Kelsey: So I read a lot of true crime, I listen to a lot of true crime podcasts, and I'm a huge horror fan. And *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is my favorite horror film. And I knew a lot about Ed Gein's case coming in, I've read a lot about Ed Gein, so I was so excited to encounter some of the sites that you chose to analyze as someone who's also coming from queer studies and disability history because I haven't seen those lenses applied to these sites or these films before, so it was really exciting.

So you've already named some of your archives and your sites of analysis. You've mentioned Ed Gein, you've mentioned the poverty tours. I thought that one of the most exciting parts of your book was the fact that your archives and your sites are really some sprawling. You're looking at true crime, you're looking at horror, you're looking at not only documentary photography but documentary film and eugenic science. I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about *why* these particular sites and what they revealed about the larger stakes of your project?

Ryan Lee: So the book spans the 20th century, so it starts in the 1910s and goes through the 1990s. The first chapter looks at eugenic family studies in the 1910s for the most part. The next chapter looks at documentary photography from the Great Depression in the 1930s. The third chapter looks at Ed Gein in the 1950s. The fourth chapter is the one on the War on Poverty and the poverty tours. And the fifth chapter is on horror films of the 1970s, like *Deliverance* and *Texas Chainsaw*. And then the final chapter looks at hate crimes documentaries in the 1990s, specifically the Brandon Teena story and a film called *Brother's Keeper*.

So I'm a historian, but I'm an interdisciplinary historian and, for me, the change over time question is one of the harder questions for me to answer. But the sort of, the trajectory of these chapters is that the kinds of discourses and ways of looking that I'm analyzing, really they existed before the 20th century, but it was at the start of the 20th century with eugenic family studies that they really became part of a national discourse and that these stories that were told about, you know, odd people down the road or the eccentric person over there, this gossip became nationalized and spread beyond the regions that it was it was started in.

Kelsey: Well, what you're saying is making me think about this term that you're using, that you introduced in your introduction, which was that *Peculiar Places* "uses anti-idyllic science, art, media, and politics as an "imaginative resource" for thinking about the materiality" - and I love this phrase that you used - often the ambiguous "ingenuity of living" that being disabled, poor, sexually non-conforming in the rural United States requires. And I'm wondering if you can say more about how you were conceptualizing the anti-idyll and its relationship to more dominant and perhaps more immediately familiar myths in the United States of white rustic virtue.

Ryan Lee: Sure. The way that I describe the anti-idyll in the book is that it's a name for a social optic that produces stories about white rural nonconformity. So, to back up since the time of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, part of the mythology of the US as a nation has been this idea of white rustic virtue and health. And that has taken different forms at different times over the decades and centuries. The anti-idyll is in some ways the flipside of that. The term comes from a geographer named David Bell who describes the anti-idyll as "the behind the sofa countryside, a place far, far from idyllic and a place that's hidden from view." It's usually easier to describe references to it than to describe it itself. So for people who've seen *Deliverance*, *Deliverance* immediately conjures it. For people who have seen *The X-Files* episode "Home," where there's a disabled woman living under a bed and brothers, it's a whole...it's too much to get into here, but that episode also conjures it immediately. So in some ways the anti-idyll is kind of the flipside of a white rustic virtue. It's kind of the excess that that doesn't fit into that narrative, but it's also more than that. So the anti-idyll and the idyll, I argue, work hand-in-hand, they work together. So the idyll romanticizes while the anti-idyll degrades. And then they work kind of hand-in-hand to present two extreme versions that both get away from the complexity and sort of mundane realities of life among, in rural white communities or among rural white people. Also, I analyze the anti-idyll as a way of looking. So for me, the anti-idyll is not a group of people or a community. It is a way of looking at a group of people, or a community, or a place, or a narrative, whatever it is, and seeing this kind of degraded vision that the viewer comes in already wanting to see. So in my later chapters, I'll often point to people who are on the ground and who came into whatever situation they were in already imagining what they were going to find and then and then finding it there. So that's the anti-idyll.

Kelsey: I really love the way you put that. When I was reading the book, I knew that you were thinking about the anti-dyll as a way of looking, but the way that you just conceptualized it as an expectant gaze or an anticipatory gaze that is sort of always already, at least in the 20th century, like as we get deeper and deeper into the 20th century, and the idioms of the anti-idyll become a lot more familiar to a broader swath of the American public, it's kind of an always already, expectant or anticipatory gaze, a way of thinking and looking at white rural poverty.

And continuing along this thread of the anti-idyll as a way of looking, you decided to center analyses of this rural white anti-idyll as it was promoted by white onlookers in particular, from a vantage point of comparative authority or affluence or socioeconomic privilege. So I'm thinking about in your first two chapters, the eugenic social worker as the one who looks, the one who is developing or projecting an anti-idyll. The FSA photographers, Lyndon B. Johnson and his poverty tours. So all figures of whiteness, but figures of a different kind of whiteness. And I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about why you chose this vantage point for your study.

Ryan Lee: I have a couple thoughts. One is that there are a lot of different vantage points in each circumstance. So they are white onlookers from a vantage point of comparative authority, but there are differences between them and among them. So sometimes it's somebody who lives in a community but is a more middle class member of that community. And so they've got a little bit of a different relationship to the poor people in their own community, maybe feel like a paternalistic sense of like authority over them or something like that. And then there are the people from out of town and then there are people with you know, a range of different positions. But I'll focus on one example to talk through this and that's the War on Poverty chapter. So in 1964, Lyndon Johnson announced a War on Poverty in the State of the Union. And then in April and May he went on these poverty tours to rural white communities that were in Appalachia or said to be in Appalachia. In this case they were in North Carolina and not really part of the mountains, which was a whole scandal at the time. So they were they were meant to represent Appalachia whether they were from there or not. And so shortly after, the War on Poverty became, after some of the urban uprisings and things like that in black communities, the War on Poverty quickly became understood as a Black bill. But initially the Johnson administration deliberately wanted it to be a white bill because the Civil Rights Act had already passed, so they didn't want to be seen as having two Black bills. So it was initially represented as a white bill. And so they visited these families to be the face of white rural poverty in the US, and one of the families that Johnson visited was a woman named Doris Marlow, her husband William, and the rest of their family. So when I analyze the story, I look at how the news about Johnson's visit with them, and then also the gossip that resulted from that visit, how that circulated in a lot of different circumstances. So I look at how local newspapers represented it and also larger newspapers in the state, which don't always have the same perspective. I look at what the LBJ officials said behind the scenes, I look at what local and state officials in North Carolina were saying behind the scenes. And then I also look at the letters that Doris Marlow wrote back to Lyndon Johnson, and that was something, you know, when people who aren't historians ask, you know, like, "Oh, do you have those like "aha" moments in the archive," I have to explain like, no, not really because I'm looking at so much material all at once and I'm not quite sure yet what my focus - you know.

So that rarely happens. But in this case there was one of those moments, which was that I, I found these letters from Doris Marlow and some of the other families he visited on the tour as well, to Lyndon Johnson or his administration. One of the things that stood out to me was that, in the margins of one of the letters somebody, it might have been Bill Moyer, it was in his files, it might have been somebody else, wrote, "Marlow again!!" with two exclamation points, showing that they were sort of frustrated at how often, how persistent Mrs. Marlow had been. She had been asking them, just straight out, been asking them for money, for cash, for jobs, sorts of things like that. Although I'm looking at views that are usually elite, whether local elite or state elite, or you know federal, in some ways, I use those views, but I don't cede authority to them. So I think that overall, I am using elite views but I'm not ceding authority to them. And whenever possible I'm looking at where

people that were not part of these elites, how they were speaking back, or making waves or sort of making themselves known in some way.

Kelsey: Another question that's coming up for me, especially if you view this project within the larger field of like critical white studies, what you're imagining was going on in terms of negotiating the boundaries and parameters of whiteness. I'm wondering what was going on in terms of preserving white supremacy? If you feel like that was a part of the story that you're trying to tell, in the production of the anti-idyll. In the stories, the ways of looking, that comparatively more privileged white onlookers were generating about sort of whiteness on the periphery or whiteness on the fringe.

Ryan Lee: I'm trying to think which chapter, would be the best for thinking this through. The eugenics chapter, it might be most obvious because - so eugenic family studies were - books called *The Jukes*, that was proto-eugenic but a part of that, and *The Kalikaks*. And many aspects of eugenic science and politics would focus on things like immigration laws and interracial marriage bans and things like that, and sterilization laws that were passed in the 1910s. The most famous examples in the 1910s were white women like Carrie Buck. But the people who were most affected by those laws were women of color and immigrant women...Black women, immigrant women of color, and Indigenous women. So all of these aspects of eugenic policy focused on either preventing reproduction among people color or preventing certain immigrants and women of color from becoming part of the body politic through immigration and things like that. And then, amid all of that, there were these studies, like *The Jukes* and *The Kalikaks* and literally hundreds of others that were done that focused on predominantly white communities, occasionally mixed race communities. There's one called *The Mongrel Virginians*, which you can probably guess what the subject of that is, that was written about the 1924 interracial marriage ban in Virginia. So that one was a little bit of a different case but, for the most part they were predominantly white families that occasionally would have, you know, a family member that was black or Indigenous in some way. And so, these studies and this focus on the white folks that you know were poor representations of whiteness still functioned to shore up white supremacy by saying on one hand, that these are exceptions, it's not all white people, it's just these very particular communities, it's a very specific type of white person, or white US born person, non-immigrant person. And then the other was that the white race can fully ascend to its superior place once we take care of these few little exceptions among whiteness. So I think that's the most probably obvious example because it's eugenics and it's very explicitly dealing with white supremacy.

Kelsey: I'm curious to hear a little bit more about the way that you're thinking about disability history and queer studies together. Because you position your project at this intersection between disability studies, disability history, and queer studies. But one of the one of the moments that I really loved in your in your introduction is that you explain to your readers that the subjects of *Peculiar Places*, and this is a direct quote, "are frequently out of sorts, abrading the edges of fields like queer studies, transgender studies, disability studies, and working-class studies without fitting in them neatly." Can you say more about how you understand the proper subjects or the proper objects of these fields? And I believe in one of your chapters you even referred to one of your actors as a "bad subject" and I'd love to hear more about why did some of the subjects in your study feel like bad subjects within the fields that you've chosen to work in and what might that indicate about the disciplinary boundaries, but also the limitations that maybe we should be pushing up against in disability history and in queer studies?

Ryan Lee: Sure, thank you. So I think that by bad subjects I mean a couple of things. So one is that they're not immediately legible as subjects belonging to the field. And then

another is that they're bad, meaning that we might not want to be associated with them or might not want. You know, especially in a field that's, you know, still fairly young, like disability studies, we might not want them to be the sort of representative subjects of the field. By way of example, I'll talk about Chapter Two, which is the chapter on documentary photography during the Great Depression. So I mean, first of all, the photographs, for the most part don't have a lot of text with them, so you don't have people self-identifying as disabled or being sort of filed under disability within an archive. But also even when I presented work about that chapter, it always led to a lot of discussion about who was disabled, who was queer, what that meant.

I look at a couple different collections of photographs in that chapter and one of them focuses on this retirement home for disabled, actually lumberjacks, all of them white in northern Minnesota. And so the photographs are, the main ones that I analyzed where you know, these men sitting on a bed together, being posed for the photograph. And there's one in particular where there are - three of the white men are sitting on the bed. They're all older men, who were pictured are elderly in their 70s 80s, I think one was 90. These three men are sitting in the bed, and two of them are sort of leaning together, they're supporting each other and one of them leans in kind of tenderly toward the other, who sits primly beside him. Throughout the book I don't, I try to make it clear that my methodology is queer and crip, but I am not claiming that any of the particular people in the book would identify as queer or crip or you know fit into that necessarily. There's also obviously the burden of proof required to claim that a historical figure was queer is very different than the burden of proof required to assume that they are straight or cis or both. So that has certainly led to conversations. But regardless, I'm not claiming the men are gay, but I'm just trying to speak to the intimacy between them and the shared domesticity between all of the men. And then in terms of disability, you know, they're all elderly and many people, even people who weren't disabled when they were younger acquire disabilities as they age. But there was a lot of conversation about, what are the specific disabilities that people are perceiving among these men. So there's - one of the men who is in a different photograph has a gnarled hand. So that is, or a burl'd hand, so that is kind of a more obvious disability, although it's not clear to me whether that would have had a functional impact on his life because those types of injuries were quite common among lumberjacks. But the way that I analyze disability...so one of the men of the two men who are sort of intimately leaning against each other, one of them is not, his gaze is not oriented to the camera. The other one, there are signs that perhaps he has difficulty with dexterity. You know he wears cuffs to hold up the oversized shirtsleeves to sort of hold them up on his arms. His pants aren't buttoned, but he wear suspenders to hold them up. So there are all of these kinds of indirect ways of perceiving that they're not able bodied per se but they're not associated with a specific diagnosis, or you know clinical definition or anything like that. But, and again, if disability is not defined by medicine you shouldn't necessarily need that either. So the lumberjacks are an example of subjects who maybe don't fit neatly into either disability history or queer history because it's not exactly clear like in what way they are disabled or what their relationship to queerness is.

So another thing with the lumberjacks in terms of the "bad," meaning that we might not want them to be the primary example of disability studies is that they were also settler colonizers on land that belonged to Red Lake Ojibwe, or rightfully belonged to Red Lake Ojibwe. And so that also makes them bad subjects that we might not want to identify with. Some of the subjects in the book are more sensationally bad you know, like they're, accused of homicide, maybe did commit homicide things like that. But in any case there are also people who might be understood to be malingering or their disability was addiction or there's complexity. Like in the case of the fratricidal brothers, one of them was accused of murdering - and this is from the chapter on the 1990s and the documentary *Brother's*

Keeper - one of them was accused of killing the other. And both of them were disabled, and so it makes that analysis of caregiver violence different when the person perpetrating, it is also disabled and marginalized in the same ways and is also a brother so it's not like, you know, as a parent and child, you know that the dynamics and relationships among them are just are complicated. But yeah, so that's the other meaning of bad subjects.

Kelsey: So brilliant and I could go in so many different directions and respond to a variety of things that you just said, but I think to start...As you were talking, I was really thinking about how one of the things that is so special about your project and the kind of - I know we're going to circle back around and talk more about a queer crip method or queer crip methodology. But I think that you are approaching disability history from a standpoint that feels more akin to different projects and approaches that I've seen in disability studies, which makes sense because you're an interdisciplinary historian. But there's been a huge shift in disability studies towards what happens if we shift our thinking about disability away from a noun or identity or, as you were saying like basing who we look for archivally on medical diagnoses. What if we move away from diagnoses, disability as a noun, disability as an identity, so like something that these individual historical actors might have claimed or asserted, and instead think about doing disability history, disability as a verb, thinking about ways of reading and asking questions that are in alignment with, how do we make sense of complex embodiment? Or complex bodyminds in a way that doesn't always adhere to disability as an identity, but is attending to structurally debilitating conditions, for example, in the workplace, under conditions of poverty, under conditions of structural, systemic racism. How does that change the way we're thinking about disability? And I haven't seen as much of that yet in disability history. So it's really exciting to see someone who's doing that work, of complicating like who gets to be the subject or the object of inquiry in disability history, so I really love that about your work.

But I wanted to ask a question kind of lingering on this. The trouble with or the complexity of working with bad subjects. You started touching on this but I wonder if you can think a little bit more with me. Several of your subjects, some of them real, others fictional, were accused of or associated with violence, whether this was sexual violence, homicide, they were settler colonizers, etc. How did you hold the moral nuances of turning to these stories and these people as valuable subjects for study without dismissing histories of violence, whether they were real or they were rumored.

Ryan Lee: Yeah, thank you. We were talking before about anti-idyllic ways of looking and the sort of expectant gaze of what somebody expects to find in a poor, rural white community, where they have these ideas of "degeneracy" and things like that. And those ideas that they carried with them often involved violence and sometimes that violence included sexual violence. And one of the things that was important to me was to kind of look at the mundane details, to disaggregate a person who commits violence in one of these communities from the communities themselves. So I'll give an example. And I should just give a trigger warning for incest and childhood sexual assault for a bit. So in the chapter on the War on Poverty there was a man who was working for the Kennedy administration, who was in West Virginia during Kennedy's primary campaign there. And he went there and expected a very specific kind of community. So he was talking to people there, he met a guy who was from there and who said that he could pretend to be a telephone company worker to look in on this family on a hillside cottage that was this kind of "perverse degenerate" type of family that he was expecting. So that's what he did, he dressed up, he pretended to work for a telephone company and he went to this these people's house for no legitimate reason. And then while he's there he sees people with disabilities and he encounters two people having sex and then he makes - again he was in their house uninvited - he makes a lot of assumptions and I think I'm going to quote from

him a little bit so you get a sense of what his expectation was. So he said that as he drove up to the cottage he saw two people who "really did look like one eyes," who were "just kind of slobbering." And then later, as I said, he saw a boy and a girl making love. And so those circumstances led Hooton to - he took those circumstances as confirmation of a rumor that he had heard, the rumor being that the father of the family had sexually assaulted and impregnated two of his daughters.

So I wanted to parse through that story. So Hooton thought that it was just like oh this terrible tale of you know degeneracy and violence and sex and incest, and all these sorts of things. But really he, again, went to these people's home uninvited, he saw people having sex, whether or not the sex was of the circumstances he was assuming, I don't know. But if it was, then he added to the situation. Here's this strange man watching this encounter. And so I wanted to address circumstances like that in order to, again, break down the power dynamics and the sense that led - both the way in anti-idyllic ways of looking, both the father and the daughters, who were the victims of the father, will be seen as just kind of representative of this kind of perverse degeneracy. And so it was important to me to separate that out and say no, the father is a person committing violence and the daughters are victims of that but, but they're not interchangeable with each other. Like the victim and the perpetrator are not interchangeable with each other, as the sort of anti-idyllic lens assumes.

Kelsey: You've provided this anecdote that is really a very concrete example of the anti-idyll in action. So this expected gaze, an onlooker who is going into a community and bringing all of their assumptions about the deviance of white rural poverty with them and is mapping that on to everything that they're seeing. A lot of the sites and the source material that you were working with were these sensational like sensationalized accounts of a kind of pathological white rural poverty. And I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about your choice to read for mundane materialities of everyday life within these sensational narratives. So combing through them for something that hasn't been observed before. That are often overlooked in order to emphasize stories of shocking violence, perverse sexuality, peculiar bodyminds that are supposedly endemic in white rural America. So why focus on the mundane, why focus on the ordinary or the familiar? And what do we gain, what do we learn, what do we trouble when we look for the mundane in the sensational?

Ryan Lee: I think, to think through the mundane and the ordinary and familiar, the best chapter to draw from is the chapter on Ed Gein. So, as a refresher, Ed Gein was a white farmer in Wisconsin in the 1950s. He murdered a woman. When the police came to his home they found all sorts of other ghoulish things in his home. They found - and trigger warning again for, I don't even know what it's called...probably body horror and ghoulish things. He used human skin to make things to upholster chairs he used, you know, things like that. He had bits of bodies all around his home, it turned out that almost all of them were corpses that he had disinterred from the ground. And there were all kinds of rumors spread about him, including this idea that he had "wanted to be a woman" or had a feminine complex that was. It was framed in all sorts of different ways, and so, as I was saying earlier, this was the seed that laid the groundwork for the idea of the "crazy trans woman killer" that we see in so much media, I couldn't possibly name it all, certainly not only horror. *Pretty Little Liars* I think had that kind of narrative you know all sorts of shows.

So in writing about Gein I was really guided by Eli Clare. So he talks about what he calls a "disability politics of transness" where he asks us to treat bodily difference as profoundly familiar. And he points out that "familiar" and "ordinary" aren't the same thing as

"normal." So normal is an external standard, it's mythical, it's not really achievable. But focusing on the ordinary allows us to think about ambivalence and grief and longing and have more complex conversations. So with Gein I thought, so, if he did experience gender dysphoria and if he did have what we might consider a mental disability, if those were true things about him, what if those were ordinary things. Like what if those were mundane. So rather than assuming that either of those things...anybody can commit a murder right? The vast majority of violence is done by people who are "in their right mind," under conditions of war or domestic violence. It's usually done by community members or acquaintances or things like that. So, uh, so most violence is pretty mundane. So what if these aspects, what if gender and disability were mundane parts of Gein, and not the cause, or the root of the story? And it was pretty easy to do that kind of analysis because although the national media was very concerned about really, they were just really obsessed with kind of a pop psychology analysis that's very different. Emily Skidmore talks about how most people, most Americans in the mid-century didn't learn about trans people through medicine, but through newspaper and media. And so the ways that those were popularly discussed and the ways that things like schizophrenia were popularly discussed in newspapers and magazines were very different than how clinicians would draw those boundaries, but regardless, the national media was very homed in on that. But the local media and Gein's neighbors were not convinced that those were the issues at stake.

So in the chapter, there are three sections and the three sections look at what people from different positions, like what they thought the kind of root of the "madness" was. And so for the national media, the root was mental disability, psychiatric disability, and gender. And then the next two sections look at Gein's neighbors and lastly, the towns that were sort of near him, so people from a little bit farther out. So for his neighbors, they understood him to be an odd bachelor, they understood him to be effeminate. A lot of the things that the national media kind of had these psychologized explanations for, it wasn't that local people disputed those, or denied them, they were just ordinary to them. There were odd bachelors, there were always odd bachelors. That wasn't the problem, you know. So for them, the problem when they tried to make sense of him really went to these racialized associations when it came to the primitive. So it took place in a couple different ways. So one was his hobbies. He enjoyed reading adventure magazines and things like that and mysteries and things. And so they thought that him reading these stories about these sort of Orientalist and persisting colonial stories about cannibalism and head hunting and those sorts of things in different indigenous communities around the world, that Gein wasn't able to understand the racial distinction between those stories and himself and that was part of the problem. And so it was that he wasn't properly "civilized" and that he didn't understand those distinctions well enough.

And then, for the communities that were, like the towns that were a little further out - so not his immediate neighbors, but people who sort of lived in the general vicinity - they told these stories about a region that they called "the dead heart of Wisconsin" that had poor soil. And these were very anti-idyllic stories as they started, you know locally and this would sort of become the basis for how horror films would tell the stories later. Where it was kind of this mysterious region where there were chicken thieves and so there were also murderers and things like that. So it was the soil itself that was the source of the problem for Gein. So again, focusing on the mundane, we see that that different communities understood gender and mental or psychiatric disability, to the extent that he had either, to be ordinary and they found other explanations for his violence. Looking at the mundane, it isn't a way of saying that this is normal, or "he's the quiet guy next door, we never had any suspicions." It's not intended to be that but if we assume that these things that are so often sensationalized are ordinary, if we just sort of held that static, then what else, what other stories might there be?

Kelsey: Absolutely. Thank you so much for that. I would love to circle back to this question of a “queer-crip methodology.” I think that perhaps utilizing a queer-crip method is a part of - or one of the things that kind of lens yields is the possibility of a focus on reading for the mundane through the sensational. But I know that it's doing more than that for you. So returning to the subject of interdisciplinarity, what is an appropriate subject of study for queer history, for disability history, I'd love to hear more about your method. And you've already started talking about your queer-crip method at various points in our conversation but I'd love to hear a little bit more because I know that this is your primary interpretive lens. Can you say more about what a queer-crip methodology *is*, what it means for you, and how applying a queer-crip methodology changes the practice of doing disability history? And why did this particular method feel appropriate for the kind of story that you were telling?

Ryan Lee: Yeah, so I talk about queer-crip history as my methodological approach and framework and crip theory and crip analysis is more prominent in literary and cultural studies than it is in history, so I'll explain the background, a little bit. So some disabled people have identified themselves as crip, “crip” of course being a shortened form of cripple since, the 70s or 80s. So it didn't start in academic circles, but it was taken up by academics, scholars like Carrie Sandahl, Robert McGruer, and Allison Kafer. And it's a more politicized and contrarian sort of analysis. So Carrie Sandahl describes criping as “spinning mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions.” And so, I think even going back to the Gein chapter that I was just discussing, I think you can see the way that I look at that material and try to spin the assumptions, that disability is a problem or the root of violence or things like that, that it can't just be a mundane, sort of ordinary fact of life. So I try to spin that kind of representation and to read against the grain of ableism. But I think it's important – I think that history is a really important part of this. I have a chapter on horror films and one of the things that I look at in depth is the experiences of some of the people who were extras in the films. And so if a scholar is just reading the text of a film and reading against the grain of it, that's one thing. But I think having the power of archival and historical research to supplement the analysis of the film really gives a lot more heft to that practice of spinning mainstream assumptions and understanding the experiences of the disabled people who are involved with that film, rather than just the representation of disability in the film. The representation is important but the material experiences of disability also have something to say about the representation in addition to larger issues.

Kelsey: Absolutely. I want to build on your use of crip theory in your project. I know that you draw upon a crip color critique, which has a close relationship to black feminist theory, as a theoretical resource for your analysis of white rural nonconformity. And I'd love to hear a little bit more about why these conceptual frameworks? So mostly I'm thinking about crip of color critique, but black feminist theory is a part of that, were useful for the story you were telling. And maybe you can reflect on the complexities of using black feminist or crip of color theory to better understand the lives of white rural poor subjects. This is the question that was perhaps the most at the forefront of my mind when I was reading your book because it brought up a lot of big picture questions for me about the portability of theories that were really initially generated to theorize the lives of particular marginalized communities. But obviously yield insights, ways of thinking, theorizing, ways of doing history that could be useful, to better understand, to historicize or theorize the lives of people who that theory wasn't initially intended to touch or speak to. So I'm curious, I'm curious about how you thought through that in your work.

Ryan Lee: Just as a starting point, I think that black feminist theory and queer of color critique and crip of color critique, that have close relationships to it, just has the most astute and powerful and nuanced analysis of power and social formations. And so that is work that I read a lot and go back to. So it shaped the way that I was thinking about how power functioned and all these other dynamics functioned in the work that I was doing even though it's in a different circumstance. You know the huge risk, one of the things I really wanted to avoid was to suggest that the subjects I'm writing of are sort of interchangeable with black women or other subjects of black feminist theory, crip of color critique, or queer of color critique, because they're not, their positionalities are not at all the same. But for example, to think about crip of color critique as Jina Kim theorizes it, she writes a lot about interdependence and mutual aid and these sorts of things among women of color, especially black women. And in the material that I'm looking at in the book, interdependence and mutual aid come up a lot, but there are also enormous limits, like it doesn't work the same way at all. So, you know, mutual aid among white people only, excluding people of color from that community, obviously is not a model that we want to work with or build on. Or even, you know, examples of where mutual aid has limits, like in *Brother's Keeper* when Delbert Ward, when he was accused of murder and there was all this attention that came to him, and then, all of a sudden, the community supported him, but before that he and his brothers, there was much more than limited support. And so some of it, some of why I draw on these theoretical resources is because, again, I think that they're the most astute analysts of power. And then another is because I was already writing about interdependence and mutual aid as Jina Kim's writing has also been coming out. And so then found natural conversations between what I was seeing and her work.

Kelsey: Just really foregrounding the way that you were looking to crip of color critique and black feminist theory for a highly developed and really nuanced analysis of power and the relationship to power, or larger systems and structures into kind of the demarcations of communities that are socially elevated or socially maligned in a way that complicates especially disability studies' more traditional fixation on identity. I'm thinking about the ways that many different kinds of communities are pushed to the margins and are marginalized in ways that put them in proximity to one another in a way that identity politics doesn't capture.

Ryan Lee: Just about that last point about communities in proximity to each other, I was just talking about queer crip analysis and sort of spinning representations and one of the things that I've had to do as a historian looking at these predominantly white communities - they're never entirely white. It's just that the way that they write about themselves, they only assume that the white people are part of the community. So, for example, in the Ed Gein chapter, to sort of spin the assumptions that I'm talking about not, just about ableism, but also about whiteness, to spin those assumptions required doing all kinds of other different types of research to really go into depth about all of the Jamaican farm workers and Mexican farm workers that were in the community, reading in *The Chicago Defender*, mentioning there were black folks that had vacation homes in that area. And then even like one of the white women victims that he killed a few years earlier, she ran a bar that that was mostly, most of her patrons were people of color. So she was a white woman, but the community didn't care about her as much when she died, even though Gein said he killed her, they didn't really look into it so. So I started with these communities being in proximity to each other and how sometimes in order to really see that in historical materials that want to deny those relationships, where like the white folks making the materials wants to deny those relationships, requires this kind of spinning and looking in different kinds of sources and things like that. But the other place where it comes up the most is in Chapter 6 in the 1990s, when I'm looking at the Brandon Teena

story. So the documentary is about part of a thing that happened. So the thing that happened was that three people were killed in Nebraska in 1993; one of them was a white trans man, one of them was a white cis woman, and one of them was a black cis man who also used prosthetic limb. And so the film is just about Brandon Teena and most of the discourse has been about Brandon Teena, who was the white trans man. But I analyzed the ways that you know, sometimes people would ask like, why was Philip Devine – Philip Devine is the black man and Lisa Lambert is the white woman – people would ask why is Philip Devine in this place? But I think everybody involved lived on the edges and the margins of this town. The white woman that he was dating was known to date other black men. Their reputation was such that a lot of white men in town wouldn't date them and so race in that situation is not just Philip Devine as the black person, right, but is also about how the white women were racialized in terms of their proximity to blackness and all these other things related to communities kind of living in proximity together

Kelsey: I'm so glad that how I was making sense of your answer to that last question led you to say more about marginalized communities in close proximity, in unexpected ways that are often glossed over in these sensationalized accounts of perverse whiteness. Like failing to grasp kind of interracial contact zones on the ground.

So I saw that your next project is on the history of chronic illness. As a historian of medicine, also as a chronically ill person, I'm really excited to see that this is a project that you're working on, specifically thinking about the history of chronic illness as a gendered and a racialized category. So am I wondering if you want to say a little bit more about the way that that project is developing in as much or as little detail as feels appropriate at this time, whatever you want to share is perfect. And alongside that anything else exciting for you on the horizon, that you want to share with our listeners!

Ryan Lee: You know, in 2019 I was a lot farther along in this project on the history of chronic illness, but not being able to travel to archives or conferences or things like that over the last couple years has really kind of slowed things down. But yeah so I'm looking at how chronic illness came to be understood as a social burden and specifically the racialized and gendered ways that it came to be understood as a social burden and so I'm looking a lot at care and ideas of "friendlessness." So friendlessness is most associated with 19th century institutions. There were a variety of institutions, they could be for orphans, it could be for people with disabilities. Many, though not all served people who were formerly enslaved and obviously had communities and networks and families ripped away from them. What friendship and friendlessness meant, even in the early 20th century, was not this kind of like personalized, psychological idea of friendship, as it is today, but about the ability to have material support. So somebody might have interpersonal support from many people in their life, but if those people also did not have access to the resources needed for a person to stay in their home and be cared for, then they might end up at an institution for the friendless. So I'm interested in the idea of friendlessness, but I'm not looking at those institutions for the friendless, it's more that idea. That was kind of where I started, and then I sort of carried that idea forward and I'm now looking at chronic illness, especially in the early to mid 20th century and how that relates to care and home care in particular.

Kelsey: Oh, that sounds so exciting Ryan Lee I cannot wait to see how that project develops and it's so fascinating the way that it emerged from encountering a term, that I've never heard before, this concept of "friendlessness," which was a part of kind of more institutional histories of disability or chronic illness. And I'm so curious to see how that relationship between friendlessness and care and kind of deprivation, being cut off from sources and material support as a result of chronic illness, play out.

Ryan Lee: So I'm thinking chronic illness became a topic of conversation more starting in the 30s and 40s. And then there were all of these kinds of surveys during the Great Depression, there was a national health survey and it sort of became a bigger concern in the 30s and 40s. But I'm looking a little bit before that. And then right now I'm hoping to end before Medicare and Medicaid because I feel like that will make the project balloon and become infinitely more difficult to wrap my head around but we'll see where it goes.

Kelsey: So exciting. Well, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today, I know that our listeners will be so thrilled to listen to this episode. And I can't wait to see what's next for you, what's further on down the pipeline. I know that I'll be revisiting *Peculiar Places* as a reference point in my own work and I'm really, really so thrilled to hear about this next project for you.

Ryan Lee: Thank you, thank you very much for having here.

Kelsey: Of course, have a good night.

Ryan Lee: Thank you, you too.

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