

TITLE: Faith and relationships: Novel reflections

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SPEAKERS:

[MVD]: Mathew Vis-Dunbar

[AC]: Alison Conway

[0:00]

[Music Intro]

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[MVD] This is Mathew Vis-Dunbar and you are listening to Frequencies, a podcast from the Library at UBC Okanagan.

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[MVD] Today we are joined by Alison Conway who is cross posted with English with the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies and Gender and Women Studies with the Irving K. Barber School of Arts and Sciences.

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[MVD] First off, I would like to thank you very much for joining us today.

[AC] Thank you for having me.

[MVD] Um I'd also like to take this opportunity to welcome you to UBC. As you've only just recently joined us here in the Okanagan. So, welcome.

[AC] It's great to be here.

[MVD] So I thought we would start this conversation with a quick introduction to your area of research. So perhaps you could give us just a brief overview of your academic interests.

[AC] So my area of research is broadly defined as 18th century cultural and literary history with a particular interest in women and uh questions of gender and sexuality. I've written two books, ah one on the visual culture of the 18th century novel that looked at portraiture in the novel in the 18th century around theories of women uh and the gays and uh visual culture in the 18th century. And then my second book was titled "The Protestant Whore" it was about courtesan narrative and how courtesan narrative shaped the history of the 18th century English novel. And I'm currently working on a project that looks at the British novel in relation to questions of interfaith marriage, particularly focusing on the place of women in religious debates of that long 18th century.

[MVD] So I would also like to touch on your work in the classroom so I know that over the years you have received much praise and several awards for your teaching.

Um so I'm wondering if you could just touch on what it is in your classroom engagement, what you try to do that's different that helps spark interest in your students.

[AC] Well I always love to have students really involved in the conversation so I'm not much for lecturing at the students. And um increasingly I'm trying to find ways of including student engagement in the classroom through the kinds of projects they're writing or producing for me. So for instance last year I taught a course called Creativity and Tolerance and for that, one of the assignments for the course was the students going into the community and interviewing members of faith communities other than their own and doing vodcasts. So they did digital histories and um and brought to it their own experiences, their own backgrounds and uh and got involved in a kind of community conversation and they found that very helpful even though the subject matter of the course was British 18th century religious toleration.

[MVD] Wow that's a super cool way of engaging the students.

[AC] Mhmm.

[MVD] In your most recent project you're looking at controversies in faith and authority within the family and you're doing so through an analysis of fiction writing. I'd like to touch on several aspects of this but I would like to know first if you can describe what the scope of this project is. So I understand there are multiple elements to this.

[AC] Right. So, the broadest context for the project I'm working on are, is debate about religious toleration in the 18th century. So that takes, so there are different levels involved. So one would be at the level of the state. So, how's the government trying to resolve questions of religious pluralism that arise out of the 17th century. But on the ground level you have more practical considerations around just co-existence among different religious communities. These are primarily Christian communities but Quakers, um living next door to Catholics, living next door to Anglicans, um there are a number of new Protestant sects in the 17th century so these people are finding ways of co-existing in their communities and that includes marriage. So the reason I'm focusing on the family is that when we read intellectual histories of the 18th century its primarily about how religious toleration was discussed philosophically and the extent to which the government was um, incorporating ideas at that kind of theoretical level or at the state level and I'm interested in what's happening on the ground as well.

[MVD] So how does the novel walk us through part of this historical narrative in a way that other areas of research perhaps don't.

[AC] Well they, the reason why everyone should read 18th century novels is that they were very topical and people really looked to the 18th century novel as a place where they could discuss issues of the day or respond to representations as though they were real lives. So for instance one of the novels I read, Samuel Richardson's "Sir Charles Grandison" has a long story about our hero who almost marries an Italian Catholic. So one of the letter writers writing to Richardson says you know, had you, you shouldn't have encouraged this tendency you know you came very close to modeling behavior that is very bad for young people who are reading your novels. And people really did seem to think that novels had that kind of power. So communities of readers were always deeply engaged in how novels spoke to issues of the day, whether it was the Marriage Act of 1753 or the Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753, all of these debates, the novel was very much part of a larger print culture that addressed them directly.

[5:49]

[MVD] So in many respects it's a milieu where the authors can push social boundaries in a way that perhaps other discourse can't?

[AC] Absolutely and especially in relation to, if you think of the novel as a place where people have feelings and um, they're allowed to have emotional lives around issues in a way that you're not going to find in philosophical discourse. They also represent practices that again, theology or philosophy or statecraft uh discourse is not going to address. So that you can have a government for instance, you know the government passes a Catholic Relief Act in 1778 and it's interested in some limited freedoms for Catholics because for one reason, so that they can get Scottish highlanders to fight their wars in Canada for them but, that sets off a huge ah riot, religious riots across Britain and the novel is able to address why that happens you know. Why the people on the street are not interested in government policy and themselves are, view that policy as hostile to their own interests. And the novel is, to my mind, much better at tapping into those emotions and also to engaging in thought experiments through its fictional representations and so let's try interfaith marriage as a thought experiment. And a novel can do that. And a philosopher can't.

[MVD] And so are there unique challenges in this work then in separating out the fictitious from the historical as we try to create a narrative that describes that period in history?

[AC] There are and the fact fiction separation has been really well studied by novel theorists because what they identify is that in the early part of the century people don't really make a distinction between fact and fiction. So Daniel Defoe can write

the “Journal of the Plague Year,” as though it’s a journal and people do think of it as a journal, they don’t think of it as a novel. But eventually they come to realize that you can write about fictitious characters and those characters can be true. But that doesn’t, um in a sense doesn’t really change the stakes in the game. They learn to read differently or fiction becomes a kind of way of talking about the truth as different than fact truth. But then you get these great characters because they are nobody, they don’t actually stand for a person, um, they can stand for anybody. So, in a sense a novel takes on more power when it gets farther away from those truth claims that you had earlier where you know you’d be looking to see who is the person behind the novel. And those kind of scandal memoirs and things earlier in the 17th century and early 18th century. But by the mid 18th century we have real novels where everybody knows we’re not talking about real people. But we are talking about real issues.

[MVD] I’m curious if we can talk a little bit about these cultural artifacts and what part of society is constructing those artifacts and how that structures how we interpret them. So I’m thinking especially as in the 18th and 17th centuries, correct me if I’m wrong, but I would assume that the production side of this is primarily male dominated and yet we’re pulling a historical narrative about the family and the role of women in society out of this.

[AC] Well in fact the 18th century is um, the rise of the woman professional author so the novel is really dominated by women writers. So in fact the 18th century is great because it’s full of women novelists. And my current project for instance, um, at the core of it is this big 1753 novel by Samuel Richardson but then each subsequent chapter is a woman author writing a novel that responds to Richardson. So they are recognizing his pre-eminence as a novelist, they themselves though are very pre-eminent novelists. So I’m only looking at novels that generated conversation and that had a certain status. So the women author in the 18th century has a lot of status and so it’s not a problem that I have to deal with in that regard. And I would always want to be looking for how are women responding to questions that are often set by male political philosophers and insert their voices into a conversation. So, an example I can give you of a more traditional situation would be, John and Susanna Wesley who were the parents of the John and Charles Wesley who are the founders of the Methodist movement. So Susanna and her husband Samuel, he was an Anglican minister but she kept having, um, religious meetings in her home and so they got into these big fights in the family because she was claiming that her preaching counted and he of course was trying to keep her in line and they got into a religious dispute that ended up with them separating for 8 months. Because he said I’m not coming, he left the home because she would not agree to his line on vowing, making vows to the king which were important to him. In evening prayer.

[10:36]

[MVD] So how does reading about 18th century debates about women relationships and religious toleration help us understand contemporary conversations on these same issues?

[AC] Well there are two things to consider. One is, um the extent to which the west considers itself to be secular. The idea that we've moved beyond religion or that a western culture is defined by a non-religious state. So one of the things I'm interested in is pushing back on that a little bit, that religious um, that secularism itself involves ideas about religion that are very much arose in the 18th century around the privatization of religion around certain types of Protestant ideas. So what happens when we come to debates today is that we may encounter a different, uh, religious system and the way it understands how people hold their faith or how they articulate their faith or how their cultural habits are associated with their religious beliefs are not recognizable to us and we say, oh but we're a secular culture. We're not exactly secular, we're sort of, the western tradition is working out its legacy, um, through the Enlightenment. So I'm hoping that the way we talk about what I call a post-secular culture allows us to recognize how religious beliefs are and cultural practices are shaping all sorts of communities, how we can engage in dialogues with different communities, much, uh more effectively than we have under the banner of toleration such as we understand it.

[MVD] In previous conversations you've talked a little bit about how religion can both limit and empower women and how this has been um, looked at in other historical narratives. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about, in both a historic and a current sense, how religion both limits and empowers women in these relationships, um, should we say particularly within the family or would you look at it at state level as well?

[AC] Well if we think most broadly, there, again, sort of two questions to consider. One is, how have religious institutions worked to discipline and contain women? And sometimes that can involve containing them within the family or containing their rights to participation in religious institutions. But there's always a history, there has never not been a history of women who have pushed back against those limits. So this is not a question of women abandoning faith, say which would be one way to describe what happened in the 20th century, women having grown disillusioned with the associations of religious institutions, with patriarchalism and misogyny, let religion go. But the interesting history for me is those women who were very active, so for instance when Quakers arose, you know women Quakers were very active as religious leaders. So were women within Methodism until Methodism sort of shut them down. Um there were always maverick religious thinkers. So Julian of Norwich was a medieval mystic who you know

probably would have been burned as a witch a hundred years later because her statements were so radical. So that to me is a very interesting history of women who were saying, who claim an attachment or claim belief systems for themselves but find ways of navigating what is clearly male dominated organized systems of um, teaching and dissemination of religious practices. And then also studying from a kind of a history of feminist theories perspective, the way that feminist theory has disavowed religion because of its institutional abuses of women and then how can we bring them back into the conversation with women who have maintained religious affiliations and how are those women today navigating the kinds of um, challenges within the institutions they practice within.

[MVD] How does the partnerships that cross religions then, how does that factor in in terms of, in this conversation of empowering or limiting?

[AC] Well I would hope that women interested in advancing the position of women whether it be in the church or um, ah would talk to members of other religious communities to see how they face the challenges of their particular faith and what they are doing women within them. So it seems to me a very fruitful place for a conversation to happen and the challenge for women who don't or aren't affiliated with any kind of religious institution or faith system is to engage with those women who are. And that's where second wave feminism in particular and forward have had challenges. So that's where I hope the work that goes back and historical shows how they talk to each other can inform the kinds of conversations we're having today.

[15:20]

[MVD] In an earlier conversation you commented that the theoretical underpinnings of your project, Sacred Engagements, this is your latest work. Um are informed by feminism and political philosophy, in particular those thinkers interested in the Enlightenment's legacy. We've touched a bit on this already but I'm wondering if you can address some of the areas in which you see the legacy of this Enlightenment discourse.

[AC] Right, so when I was talking about the way secularism understands itself as non-religious I suggested that actually what it's talking about is how we manage the religious and so for instance John Locke was very keen on privatizing religion so you know, you don't interfere with your neighbours religion and um everybody kind of has a right to religious freedom as long as it's not disruptive of any kind of public space and for me what's interesting is, again that the Enlightenment is not thinking about private experience. But if we attend to those spaces that it tends not to look at, like the family, family governance, so for instance with John Locke says men and women are equal except for, you know, if there's any real contest

men have to have the authority because someone has to have the authority. So it's quite arbitrary. But he says but they can never deprive women of certain essential rights. So when a women comes along and says well my right is to my religious principle, then whose authority counts in the family? And that you know of course has huge implications for how the state would then look at the family and questions of authority when a women says, um, I'm not going to obey my husband's religious authority because that's not my religious principle. Her liberty of conscience grants her the right to then disavow his authority as a husband. So those are the kinds of contests that Enlightenment philosophy is not really attending to even though it often goes back to the family as the source for understanding human nature, human conduct and um social relations.

[MVD] With Sacred engagements also you're trying to dispute the notion that the problem of religious difference was somehow solved during the 18th century. I'm wondering if you can address some of the challenges that we continue to face that debunk this Liberal historical narrative.

[AC] Right so, yah the idea was we had several religious wars in Western Europe in the 17th century and in England. Um those were resolved when everybody decided that each nation would get to decide its own faith system and we would stop fighting wars about it and that communities would learn to get along by simply tolerating other people's faith and not interfering with it but that doesn't account for the fact that we continue to have these kind of religious uprisings, riots, uh, so there's something about religious sensibility that those political discourses is not capturing or addressing. So my sense that um, you know we haven't, obviously we haven't beyond religious conflict if we look at the global context and um, that sense of how can we speak to it more concretely means that people I think have to get past a very shallow understanding of what tolerance is. So to give you an example, my students who took the class on creativity and tolerance you know they always assume that romantic love should overcome everything. Right, that if, we're talking about interfaith marriage. But when you press them a little harder and you say ok well, the couple marry, they love each other very much, their faith is sort of secondary to that. But what happens when you decide what faith the children are going to be raised in? Um, what happens if you really believe your partner is going to hell? Because the teachings of your church are that unless he converts to Catholicism he really is. So there are a number of kind of religious questions that you have to ask yourself. Do you not believe that tenant? Do you not believe that to be true? Which parts of your church's mandate are you taking on and taking off and what does it mean to be just picking and choosing? So I try to press them on the way that you think you're very tolerant, but actually if you press a little harder most people aren't. So my interest is in making people much more comfortable with discomfort. And asking really hard questions without finding them threatening or

alarming or problematical. So my goal is to make tolerance as uncomfortable as possible.

[19:45]

[MVD] So we're also taking advantage of this opportunity to introduce you to the campus more broadly and to share some of your interests that move beyond your academic research. And we'd like to bridge into this conversation through a discussion of two other books. So the first is Haruki Murakami's "What I Talk About When I Talk About Running" and Victoria Pitts-Taylor's "The Brain's Body". So I thought maybe we would start with "What I Talk About When I Talk About Running". What is Murakami's addressing in this memoir that is of particular interest to you or speaks to you?

[AC] Well those who don't know Murakami. He's a contemporary novelist famous for his blending of American and Japanese fictional practices and um, so he's not my favorite novelist as a novelist even though I admire him enormously and he hopefully will win the Nobel Prize for literature, you heard it here first. But so I was interested in him but then when I came back to running a few years ago I came across his memoir and it, the quality of writing makes it just an amazing text to engage with as a literary scholar. So that was my first line of interest was just how strong the writing was. But then I became interested in how the strength of the writing seemed very much connected to the topic. And he says at some point, when I think about myself I think about my running, or when I write about my running I'm writing about myself. That's what he says. And that became to me really interesting. So how is he connecting this very brain centered activity of writing with this very embodied practice of running, which he took up when he became a novelist and was worried that he was going to have too sedentary of a life and eh was smoking 60 cigarettes a day and needed to change his lifestyle. So that convergence of him becoming a runner when he became a writer means the link is very strong for him.

[MVD] And so is there a connection for you between your running and your professional life and the work that you do?

[AC] Well I think now that there is because as I say I came back to running after a 20-year gap but what I've noticed is, one - running is just a very good place to think. So there's a good correlation between intellectual activity and running but also as a feminist and someone interested in questions of embodiment and gender and sexuality I have become increasingly connected to running as a way of thinking about certain feminist theoretical questions. So I would say running probably doesn't shape my thinking about the 18th century novel, but running certainly shapes my thinking about contemporary debates in feminist theory, especially

those around embodiment, cognition of science, and some of the new work that's been done on the new materialism.

[MVD] Hm, could you expand on that a little bit?

[AC] Well so so um well this gets us to the Brain's Body.

[MVD] Okay.

[AC] But what people like Victoria Pitts-Taylor are thinking about are um how do you talk about questions of the body without reducing those questions to a kind of essentialism or to, or another way to ask is how does feminism reframe questions that are studied by science, um and expand the limits? Because science will often fall back on categories that feminism is interested in pushing. So for example, when Victoria Pitts-Taylor is talking about, she's talking about kinship and neurobiology, she looks at the production of oxytocin and um, shows how the studies always focus on mother infant relations when they talk about the production of oxytocin. Which happens when women breastfeed. But she goes into the studies that show that actually other, not just mothers but other people can have the production of oxytocin generated simply through acts of bonding. And so she starts to say well how is it about bonding, not about an essentialized, you know women have this in their body and this is what happens when they breastfeed. She's like what other forms of kinship produce the same release? So then we can start talking about kinship not as this biological essentialist practice um, so that all mothers have to breastfeed or they won't produce oxytocin. But she, so she goes and finds out that adoptive mothers also produce oxytocin when they're bonding with their infants. So it becomes less about you know the female body then about the ways in which certain kinds of neurobiological features can be looked at differently and then we see different things happen in bodies that are connected to social systems.

[24:18]

[MVD] Um cause I also I think it's interested cause when you start talking about kinship like this it does actually bring us back into some of the research that you do and looking at this sense of how is a family defined in the Enlightenment period and how do we understand a family now and how do we understand it from a scientific perspective and how do we understand it from a cultural perspective.

[AC] Yah and I would love all ideas about kinship to be as expansive as possible to include groups and communities and friendships and alliances and that counter social isolation, vulnerability, um that can be really felt in the body but also as a social experience or expectation. And uh and the way that you need your allies to

have your back and that was true in the 18th century and women were very good at fostering communities among themselves then and now and I find you know women in sport are very, the ones I've met, are very good at forging those alliances and supporting each other in the goals they are trying to reach.

[MVD] Thank you so much for taking this time to speak with us today. I'm sure our audience will thoroughly enjoy your conversation.

[AC] Thank you for having me.

[Music fades in]

[Music fades out]

[MVD] You have been listening to Frequencies, a podcast from the Library at UBC Okanagan. Your host today was Mathew Vis-Dunbar. Editing by Karin Haug and Mathew Vis-Dunbar. Music by Trevor Neill. Artwork by Alison Ward. Additional support provided by Arielle Lomness and Steven Vas. Thank you for listening.

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[26:09]