



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Unearthing the Voices of the Marginalized Through Medieval Studies with Professor Kristina Richardson

In this episode, Professor Kristina Richardson, a distinguished historian and Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar, joins Fred Lawrence for a compelling conversation about her groundbreaking research on marginalized communities in medieval Islamic societies. Professor Richardson sheds light on the lives of disabled individuals, Romani crafts people, and East African enslaved laborers—groups often overlooked. She also explores her personal journey from Detroit to academia, her transformative fieldwork on Pemba Island, and the integration of Swahili into her research.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Professor Kristina Richardson. Professor Richardson is the John L. Nau III Professor of the History and Principles of Democracy and Professor of History and Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Virginia. She specializes in histories of non-elite groups in the Middle East. She is the author of two monographs, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World* in 2012 and *Roma in the Medieval Islamic World: Literacy, Culture, and Migration* in 2022. She's the recipient of the celebrated Dan David Prize in History, the Monica H. Green Prize for Distinguished Medieval Research from The Medieval Academy of America, and received honorable mention for Middle East Medievalists Book Prize. She is currently writing a book on free and unfree South Asian and East African agricultural laborers in early Islamic Iraq. Welcome, Professor.

Kristina Richar...: Thank you so much, Professor Lawrence, for having me.

Fred Lawrence: It's wonderful to have you with us. History, at least as practiced by the history profession, was once the province of those who articulated consensus views and often told the story of elites politically, socially, and economically. You, on the other hand, have research that is focused on pre-modern non-elites in Arab history. Am I right to situate your work in the, if you will, bottom-up approach to history that at least I associate half a century ago with the likes of Jesse Lemisch and distinguished Phi Beta Kappa member Robert Gross and others studying history through the lens of non-elites who maybe weren't president of anything and maybe weren't captains of anything, but they lived their lives and they thus defined their times.

Kristina Richar...: With almost no exception, I've worked on people on the margins of society in medieval Islamic contexts, and I'm really drawn to these margins because I feel that they illuminate the center in ways that are usually unexpected. So I like that process of discovery from the outside in.

Fred Lawrence: When we talk about the margins, you have illuminated a number of different margins, people with disabilities, people who use sign language to communicate, the Romani groups, craftspeople, free laborers who were enslaved people. Are there throughlines through all of these groups on the periphery that you've found in your work?

Kristina Richar...: I would say that each subsequent topic draws on the previous topic. I started with working on disabled people and basically the ways in which they wrote about their own bodies and then the networks of scholars who were also disabled. They were creating communities of writers who were disabled, but they were all pretty privileged. So then I moved on to the Roma because that was pretty much by accident. I was working on a finger alphabet that was in a notebook by a weaver who lived on the margins of Aleppo, and he wrote about the people he lived with and he lived with travelers and Romani people and nomads, and he talked about them, and that got me interested.

So someone in a group on the margins of a major city, but also who also just produced work that wasn't really visible in the center, and then from there, I've moved on to, I'm sure we'll talk about it later, but enslaved people because a lot of these roaming bands actually took in fugitive slaves and gave them protection. So I'm learning about more and more disadvantaged and marginalized people as I go, so it's been wonderful.

Fred Lawrence: Thinking about lots of different conflicts and a time, I think it's fair to say, in which there is now certainly in the academy, but I think beyond the academy, there is more attention to marginalized people than there once was, and your project in many ways strikes me as, I don't know, anachronistic in the good sense, that is to say taking the lens of shining a light on people who might be on in the periphery and say, let's use that same lens and apply that to a medieval time when there's much less work of that, at least contemporaneous.

Kristina Richar...: Sure. I also think it's important just to realize how under-equipped we are both in the modern and today and in the past, to kind of understand these both linguistically, be it linguistically or be it in terms of just culturally understanding what's happening, so I think there's a strong awareness, at least on my part, that it's also very a difficult undertaking to try to find those voices that are typically silenced, but that it's worthwhile and that it's usually pretty imaginative work. So in that sense, it's very satisfying once you do find a way to get in there.

Fred Lawrence: How much is the fact that marginal voices get lost in time unless we recover them? How much of that is, I don't know if you will, the Marxist insight that the ruling ideology, the ideology, the ruling class or the cultural norm becomes the norm of the ruling class, and how much of it is as reductionist as who wrote the histories?

Kristina Richar...: Well, there's a lot there. I would say a lot has to do with who wrote the histories, of course. I think you're absolutely right that, I mean, the bias is towards writers who usually had the time and the leisure to write. I mean, it's not even just about literacy, but it's about how do you even find the time? And I think scholars listening in today can relate to that. So I think what I've had to do to get at some of the histories I've done is to look beyond the strictly textual. I think that's fun and interdisciplinary work, but it's also not how historians are typically trained. So looking at archeological methods and how to read a landscape, for instance, professional hunters or professional farmers or shepherds for instance, how to read a night sky, how to read the stars, how to understand weather phenomena. This might've been a form of literacy that marginalized people may have had, rather than maybe the very textual and very grammatically focused work of elite scholars. So that's been fun work to do.

Fred Lawrence: Tell us a little bit about what it was like growing up in the Detroit area where you went to high school. Were there particular teachers who influenced you? Looking back now, how do you see that as what turned out to have been the launch for your career?

Kristina Richar...: That's a lovely question and a nice nostalgic question. Yes, so I did grow up in and around Detroit, which is a fascinating city for a lot of reasons. I mean, it's a renaissance. It's fascinating, but also its people, of course. It's majority Black and well, when I was growing up there, there were more Arabs living there. A lot have moved to a neighboring city called Dearborn. But anyhow, my environment was mostly Black and Arab, and I grew up, I suppose, attending just very casually without a lot of fanfare, but attending Ramadan celebrations or just hearing Arabic spoken at my friend's homes.

While that was not academic at all, I think it did prime me to just see it as something that reminded me of home. When I went away to college and I went to Princeton, I started studying Arabic there. Probably, as I look back, I might've been a little homesick and not realizing it, and it grew from there. So it was just a familiar home environment that I made more of an official scholarly endeavor.

Fred Lawrence: Looking back now to the young woman who was attending Ramadan celebrations and hearing Arabic spoken, is the path that followed predictable or are there too many twists and turns to actually be able to say that?

Kristina Richar...: Actually, I think it would be pretty predictable. I think Detroit was pretty formative. I didn't live there my entire childhood, and then we moved out of the city at one point. But what was formative was just seeing how neglected a space could be. If you've seen the film 8 Mile, Eminem's autobiography, he's creating a space of artistic creation and community that just felt like the center, so I think that was pretty formative. I've maintained that desire to see how people are making something out of very harsh and hostile spaces.

Fred Lawrence: Now, when you returned to the Detroit area and nearby Ann Arbor to go to graduate school at University of Michigan, do you remember a moment when you thought to yourself, "If I can swing it, making a career out of studying and thinking about these things and writing about these things, that's what I want to do"?

Kristina Richar...: I think from the moment I started, I'd always imagined myself teaching, and I'm glad it just worked out that way because now I realize how naive that assumption was, but I've always been animated by the idea of just... I mean, I've always thought if I lived in the Middle Ages, I would've loved to have been not a monk, but a nun or just whoever could spend time reading and writing all day. So this is a dream job. I am lucky that I haven't thought of alternatives and didn't have to think about it.

Fred Lawrence: Let's talk about a couple of your Visiting Scholar lectures. We're so delighted that you're with us at the Phi Beta Kappa community this year as one of our Visiting Scholars going to a number of different schools across the country, giving public lectures, also participating in colloquia on campus or classes, however the campus wants to use you. One of the lectures focuses on the Medieval Romani printers and

how they'd been block printing centuries before printing on paper had made its way into Central Europe. Tell us about this and how it spread as the Roma people migrated.

Kristina Richar...: Yes, that was a very surprising find when I was researching my book, *Roma in the Medieval Islamic World*, to learn that. We'd known that printing in the Middle East had been happening, printing text on paper, had been happening since the 900s, and there are prints in Hebrew and Arabic and Syriac and Greek and Aramaic that we know of, and there could be more of course that we haven't discovered. We know that the prints or the latest print we have, which we can date through watermarks on paper, is around 1440.

We also know, and I was able to find over the course of this research, that the printers were actually these travelers, these Romani people and people associated with the Roma. So this was a portable art. You could carve wood, you could ink the wood, you could press the paper and you could travel with your blocks. It was lucrative and you only needed one person who could read to carve the block and you could print endlessly from that. We also knew that Roma had migrated into Central Europe in the 1410s, so that's very clear from Medieval Latin and German vernacular sources. But I think before I did this work, no one had put together maybe the process of printing in the Middle East and this Romani migration, and before Gutenberg was printing in the 1440s, we do know that print was emerging in southern Germany in the 1410s, so the same time that the Roma were migrating into Europe.

So I was able to show, or at least argue, and I haven't read or heard a counter-argument, but I was able to argue that as they moved in and they were claiming to be repentant Christians, that they'd been Muslim, they'd converted and they went back and forth, and so they had been ordered to wander for seven years by their eastern Bishop. As they wandered along pilgrimage routes, the earliest prints we have were emerging in monasteries and nunneries along these routes. We also know the route they took because of contemporary German sources, and so we know the route they took north through from southern Germania up to the coast, and we know that prints were emerging on those same routes. So my argument is, yes, maybe 30 years before Gutenberg's press was invented, we had Romani itinerant printers in Central Europe.

Fred Lawrence: Now, when we think about Gutenberg, first of all, that traditional stories that that's transformational, which is this kind of fiction that there was no printing, and then all of a sudden there was printing. So as you've illuminated, there were different kinds of printing, but at least if I've got this right, the printing press was a big old machine and you were not going to put that on your back and be able to migrate around. So it sounds as if one of the things that comes with Gutenberg that's less talked about is a real transformation of the culture of printing as to who's going to be engaged in this.

Kristina Richar...: You're absolutely right. Gutenberg's invention was transformative. It was singular, I should say, but I think that the story of Gutenberg and these Romani printers just need

to be told together. I mean, in fact, as the Roma were migrating northwards, they actually passed through the City of Erfurt about 1418 or 1417, and in this year, Gutenberg was attending university, this is what Gutenberg specialists argue, at that same time. So there's no evidence I have or anyone has that he met Romani printers, but it's clear this is the same orbit. This is why I like center and march, because you just have to tell it together to get a better sense of the past.

Fred Lawrence: But he doesn't transform it from scribes and handwritten into printing, that there's other kinds of printing that predates him?

Kristina Richar...: Oh, yes. He's standing on the shoulders of, I would argue, a very long technological journey that's coming from East Asia through West Asia, Middle East into Europe. So he's standing on centuries of previous work.

Fred Lawrence: Turns out everybody does.

Kristina Richar...: Yes, absolutely.

Fred Lawrence: Another one of your lecture topics inevitably focuses on the institution of slavery and what you call racial capitalism in the Islamic Indian Ocean. First of all, how do you define racial capitalism as you're using that term?

Kristina Richar...: I'm defining it in these lectures as a system of exploitation that's based on both defining so-called aberrant racial characteristics and then upholding the system of exploitation by redefining and reiterating and just institutionalizing these ideas about racial difference.

Fred Lawrence: How does that play a role, particularly in the Indian Ocean area where, as you say, you've put your focus in different parts of the world, but the Indian Ocean is a big body of water, but obviously, if I can mix the expression, it's a social ecosystem too. How is it functioning that way? Tell us a little bit about that, and then let's fold this racial capitalism concept into it.

Kristina Richar...: The extent of East African slavery in the Middle East and in the pre-modern period is grossly underestimated. I think there's a lot of literature, and I'm sure a lot of listeners at home have heard about the golden age of Islam that lasted during the Abbasid Empire from 750 to about 1258. This was a time of incredible intellectual development and enrichment and philosophical inquiry and musical development, science and literature, and all of that is true, but I also believe that it rests on a very extensive system of enslavement, drawing largely from East Africa.

So the enslaved peoples from East Africa worked out of doors usually, so with animals, they tended fields. They basically grew the food that fed an empire. I'd like us to think a little more deeply about when we say golden ages, who enabled this golden age. So how does racial capitalism fit into that? I think there were very clear systems, and I'm

not the chief scholar on this question. I can recommend lots of other people who've worked on processes of racialization in the Middle East, especially with East Africans and people of the Southern Indian Ocean, like Madagascar and Indonesia. I want to show how early this system was set up to engender and feed and develop this vast slave trade.

Fred Lawrence: One of the things that's striking to me about your approach to your work, you're a historian after all, that's your PhD, that's your departmental work, that's your disciplinary lens that you bring to this. You're not an anthropologist, you're not a sociologist, and yet you seem to be engaged in some extensive and fascinating field work. Let me ask you about the archeological dig you were involved in last summer on an island off the coast of Tanzania, Pemba Island, if I have that right. First of all, how does that kind of work relate to your work? How do you see this lighting the path of a historian?

Kristina Richar...: Yes, actually, that has been... I think this has been, what happened this last summer in Pemba, this is very transformative. So I have the great fortune to work with an archeologist of early Islamic East Africa. Her name is Adria LaViolette, and she invited me to join her on her dig, and she's been working there for 30 years. She's quite a veteran. But I wanted to learn about archeological concepts and practices and also things like I said earlier, like how to read a landscape. I'm a city person. I've grown up in cities. Before I moved to Virginia, I lived in New York City, so this was completely foreign to me. Especially how would a medieval person read a landscape, not just someone today.

I think that's very important because I'm working with sources mostly that are non-textual sources to get at enslaved people's histories, and so I'm also learning astronomy, like how to read the night sky in the Southern Hemisphere and the Northern Hemisphere. So I think this has been helpful for me to just really try to think more like someone of the past would've thought.

Fred Lawrence: I understand you were also learning Swahili. What's the impetus for that and how does it relate to your work?

Kristina Richar...: I was trained as a philologist, both at Princeton and in my graduate studies, and even in my work with the Roma, I mean, a large part of the book was actually excavating a medieval dialect that these printers spoke, and it's still spoken today, so it's also a dialect we did not know about, we didn't know its name. So I was able to bring what the speakers called it, they called it Sin. I like to have that linguistic evidence, although it feels a bit retrograde, but I also think it's incontrovertible. It's enlightening to see what they were saying, how they were speaking and how language has shifted over time.

But to Swahili, I guess, actually, I'm kind of amazed that we don't have that as a standard paired language with Arabic studies for scholars because there's a lot of Arabic in it, and it's relevant, and it's a major Muslim civilization from the 8th century onward. I'm hopeful that it will come in handy. Oh, maybe I'll come across something in an Arabic manuscript that's not Arabic, and I'll be able to see, oh yes, maybe this was a classical Swahili term.

Fred Lawrence: I was going to say, I know that there are borrowed Swahili terms in Arabic. Does it go the other direction as well? Does Swahili borrow Arabic terms?

Kristina Richar...: Oh, Swahili definitely borrows a lot of Arabic terms. I'm not sure how much Arabic has absorbed just Swahili, unfortunately. But you can read through that history of language, through historical linguistics. You can understand a lot about interactions.

Fred Lawrence: How have you integrated this into your teaching of undergraduates or graduate students at Virginia?

Kristina Richar...: Well, I've definitely expanded my undergrad teaching to include early Islamic East Africa, which people find, I mean, not just students, but even fellow professors find very fascinating because it really is kept out of... For anyone who studies Eastern history, this really isn't anything that anyone does. If you go to Central Asia or South Asian history, that's more typical or contact between Europe and the Middle East is more common. So it's eye-opening, I mean, that there were coins being minted in East Africa in the 8th century, that they had Arabic on them, that the first mosque that we've excavated in East Africa was from the 700s, that there was a literate and written culture, and that there's even in Persian and Arabic sources, there are references to writing to embassies in Zanzibar in about the 10th century. So you have correspondence that hasn't survived, but people write about it, so I think that's opened up some possibilities.

As for graduate students, I guess I'm always encouraging my students to just be as curious as possible about everything and never to foreclose any possibility. I think I'm living what I'm advising them, and so that's good for them to see, I hope.

Fred Lawrence: One of the things I always ask my guests on Key Conversations to do is to help our listeners build their reading lists. We like to think that listening to Key Conversations would be a pretty good liberal arts and sciences program. If this is all you did for your continuing education, this would be a pretty good start. But that's not all, we'd like to give them advice and guidance from our guests about where else they might continue their reading. So I wonder if you have for us a couple of book recommendations for people for whom this is new, this area, this area of the world, this area of studies, this area of history, and those who have some background in it, but are looking to push their knowledge to a higher level.

Kristina Richar...: Sure. I could definitely recommend a couple of great books. One that just came out is Rachel Schine's book, *Black Knights*, that's Knights with a K. The subtitle is *Arabic Epic and the Making of Medieval Race*. This came out with the Chicago Press. She looks at early Arabic epics, such works by popular storytellers and how ordinary people constructed their environment and also how they constructed difference. It's really a brilliant read.

I would also recommend Travis Zadeh's *Wonders and Rarities*, which is about beautiful manuscripts of the Middle Ages, but also about how people of the time saw the world. These types of manuscripts have been categorized as fantastic and magical, but they're really works of natural history, so how people tried to make sense of what they saw. I guess the last book I would recommend is actually by one of the historians who was on the dig with me this summer, and this is Rhiannon Stephens, *A History of African Motherhood*. She actually works on East African historical languages, and she looks at shifts over time to understand how concepts of say, wealth, motherhood, etc., have changed. So I think those are really good ways to get into seeing how people saw the world around the Indian Ocean.

Fred Lawrence: And again, bottom up in terms of the actual people, not the leaders of these societies, out on the periphery as looked at from the center, but looked at from their own lives. It was very much the center.

Kristina Richar...: Yes, absolutely. Yes.

Fred Lawrence: You've told us not to be afraid to ask different questions. Thank you for bringing that intellectual lens and intellectual courage to your work as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar this year, sharing it with our campuses across the country, and thanks so much for sitting down with me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Kristina Richar...: Thank you.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode. Michelle Baker is editor and co-producer, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Jan Purchick. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar Program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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