

KARL W. WEISS '87

FACULTY LECTURE SERIES

GENDERED AND RACIAL BORDERS OF BELONGING: Need and Health Care in Massachusetts, 1740-1770



ANGELA KEYSOR | History

February 1, 2023

7 pm

Gladys Mullenix Black Theatre

This presentation will examine how local networks of health care in eighteenth-century Massachusetts responded to the demands of single, widowed and abandoned women of European and African descent. These women were active negotiators and participants in their own care and crafted their own definitions of 'need'.

Town leaders used these conceptions of need to inform decisions of who should be officially classified as 'needy' and therefore deserving of care. European-descended women forged spaces to advocate for their own interests and exert control over their roles within local care networks. African-descended women also interacted with town authorities to advocate for their health needs and found that their voices were silenced.

Instead of a category that is self-apparent and materially-grounded, need emerges as a condition that is inconsistent over time. Town authorities refused to apply the label of 'needy' to those who posed challenges to local authorities' ideas and valuations of racial identity and community belonging—regardless of the level of physical need suffered. Ultimately eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century understandings of need reveal dynamic and contentious power struggles for acknowledgement of individual lives. A failure to problematize understandings of need in history renders invisible the very significant and potent power that the label of 'needy' possessed in colonial American society.

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