TJ 0:00
Welcome to overdue a podcast about archives, history, and justice. I'm Thai Jones, curator for American history at Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library. For today's conversation, my co-host, Lina Moe talked to Maya Moretta, who at the time was a senior at Georgetown University. As a student, Moretta had worked with the Georgetown Slavery Archive to compile a massive database of names of enslaved people owned by Georgetown, and the Maryland Jesuits. She also became an activist working with Students for GU272 to pass a historic referendum demanding reparative justice for the descendants of enslaved people sold by the University in the 1830s. Since the referendum's successful passage in 2019, Maya has fought to have the decision enacted in practice. Maya chose to attend Georgetown University because she had heard so much about student activism on campus, and she was impressed by what she read about the university's commitment to addressing its own histories of enslavement. But when she arrived as a freshman in the fall of 2017, she realized that these conversations – that were literally making news all around the world – were nowhere to be seen on campus. She set out to change that through research and activism. When I listen to Maya and Lina's conversation, I am most struck by a single word, "We." Despite frustrations with Georgetown, Moretta still identifies herself and her community of scholars, activists and students as being part of the university. People don't feel that way about other institutions involved in histories of enslavement and historical injustice. You don't hear a lot of activists using the pronoun "we" to talk about banks, railroads, insurance companies. But universities are our homes for a crucial part of our life. And our association with them becomes part of our identities forever. This is why the Universities Studying Slavery movement has grown so powerfully in the past two decades. We want these institutions that we care so much about to live up to their highest potential. And that's what I hear most clearly. In this conversation between Lina Moe and Maya Moretta. Now on overdue.

LM 2:22
I have with me here today Maya Moretta, Georgetown senior. Thank you so much, Maya for talking to me on the podcast.

MM 2:31
Oh, thanks so much for having me.

LM
So I wanted to start When did you arrive on campus? And at the point when you arrived on campus? What was the conversation about Georgetown's history with slavery? Like, was it something you showed up knowing? Or was it something you learned about once you arrived?

MM
So I guess I started on campus fall of 2017. And when I was applying

to Georgetown actually, like right before I filled out my application, it was when President DeGioia actually made his announcement about the creation of the working group and kind of like the acknowledgement of enslavement at Georgetown. So it's interesting because I actually applied to Georgetown thinking that I was honestly kind of impressed by the way that Georgetown was handling their relationship with enslavement just because I'm from the south. I'm from Texas, and kind of what happens there is just like, nobody talks about it. It's just like, not acknowledged. And so I was really impressed with the fact that the school was making a statement on like a national scale. And that is honestly one of the reasons why I gravitated towards Georgetown, I thought it was really intriguing, and I was really excited about it. And then I got to campus. And it was interesting, because it kind of seemed like it didn't really didn't actually exist. So like people didn't really talk about it. I became a tour guide my freshman year, too, and like it was never addressed in our tours, the buildings were renamed, but nobody really knew why they were renamed. And then I was just talking to more students and realizing that so much of the work that had been done, the actions that Georgetown had taken were because of student activists who had sat in President DeGioia's office for an extended period of time and demanded changes. And so I definitely had a different feeling I think about Georgetown's relationship with its enslavement as I went through my freshman year.

LM 4:23
So the international conversation or the national news conversation, was something that attracted you to Georgetown, and it almost seems like it was like more of the conversation about enslavement was directed outward. What was the conversation... What were the conversations that you saw among students? Was it mainly did it happen in classrooms? Was it happening, as you mentioned in student groups, student activist groups? Did you ever see an informal conversation like at a party or in the cafeteria?

MM 4:58
I would say that in terms of classes, not really, that is also interesting, because like, even the classes that I was taking, which I think would probably have lended themselves more towards that conversation, still weren't really articulating it. I know that it's a lot better now. I was honestly kind of shocked that it wasn't included in New Student Orientation. We're getting all of these messaging about how important the history of Georgetown is. And then I get to campus and it's not. It's nowhere, the University stresses so much about how we were established in 1789. And how long the legacy of Georgetown is, and then it's just very, is very bizarre to me, I think how little it was discussed, I would say, the history and the activism were discussed by people of color, and people in the social justice community. But I would say that that's not the majority of Georgetown, and that the majority of Georgetown probably had no idea about it. And I mean, I know that for a fact. Because when we were working on the

reparative, Justice effort, I mean, there was just so many people I would speak to who literally didn't even know Georgetown owned enslaved people. But I think that in other circles, people were very dedicated to it. So I know like Professor Rothman definitely had a lot of conversations in his classes. But I think it had to be very intentional by professors and students to have that conversation, even though it seemed like the university kind of was angling it as if it was kind of a widespread conversation reckoning.

LM 6:28
So I want to step back for a minute, you arrived on campus, and it felt like there was a disjunction between what you'd read about the intense conversations and self reflection that was happening on campus, and what you found when you got there. And I want to get back to the referendum and how, as you say, things did change while you were student there. And the conversation did ramp up and putting the question of an activity fee up to a campus wide vote did for students to become more informed. But as I said, I want to step back first to ask about how you got introduced to the slavery archive at Georgetown. And what is your role there now?

MM
So I was in Professor Rothman's class, my soph-, sorry, my freshman spring and then in the fall, he emailed me and he was like, Hey, would you like to do some work in the archives, just because I had been really interested in that kind of content in his class, I took a history of New Orleans class, it was super interesting. And basically, my job was just to go through all of the documents and like catalog names of enslaved people who are mentioned in the documents. And it was a really intense experience for me and really kind of shaped my next three years at Georgetown, even what President DeGioia had referenced when I had heard what he was saying when I was a when I was a senior in high school. It didn't really wholly represent what Georgetown's relationship with enslavement have been. Like, for example, my spreadsheet was 2500 people. It's just it was an extensive economic process for the establishment of Georgetown University. And I think that that idea gets lost when we represent Georgetown's enslavement to only be 272 people. Obviously, that's the amount of people who were forcefully sold into Louisiana. But those were not all of the people, the Jesuits enslaved at Georgetown, I mean, they owned three plantations, students could choose to pay more money so that they could have their own enslaved person at Georgetown, you know, like it was such an extensive thing in Georgetown wouldn't have existed without it. And so I think that it took me aback, and it made me realize just how much is owed to these people, and how you cannot separate Georgetown from enslavement, it's just not possible it would not exist. And so that's kind of why I got so involved in the reparative justice effort, because I was just reading these documents. And I'm like, there has to be something that you can do about this. The fact that I'm cataloguing people's names into an Excel spreadsheet

is obviously great, because like, we need to know their names, but also like, what does it mean to just know their names if you can't do anything about it. And so some other students had already started this effort, and I ended up joining.

LM 9:22
So you were a freshman and sophomore, researching the names and personal histories of enslaved people in the archive, and pulling these names out and adding them to an Excel spreadsheet. And eventually this, this work in the archives spurs you to on campus action. But can you describe what some of the documents you pulled those names out of were?

MM
Yes, let's see, the interesting thing about Georgetown, or like the Jesuits is the fact that they kept meticulous records. And so it's really great, because like, there's first last names like family trees and stuff. It's a I mean, it's an amazing resource for this. So but I would say like some of the most intense documents for me to read are just like diary entries, I think of Jesuits who are wrapping their heads around how their actions are beneficial to enslaved people, right. And so, because they're Catholics, because they're, they're somehow they're trying to wrap their heads around the fact that they're whipping a woman on the front lawn and how that's like good for her because now she's getting closer to God. I think also just reading the kinds of like ledger's and documents of students. It's hard to explain so like how students could really just interact with enslaved people as if they were property completely. And like, it wasn't even just the Jesuits. And they weren't just making money off of their plantations. It's also that students were able to bring enslaved people from their own homes, and, like, rent them out, right, or how you could just sign up to have an enslaved person, like a meal plan, you would now I mean, it's, it's just crazy, like how deeply ingrained it was into the culture of Georgetown, and exactly everything and how it ran. You can't say it was separate from the university, you can't say it was only a few people, like you can't say that these people didn't even see them because they were somewhere else making money like it was, what sustained the university. It was how students interacted with each other every single day, like there was just no way to escape that. And I think that like that was, the biggest thing for me is just the fact that like life at Georgetown, just simply like what wouldn't exist without the work of enslaved people.

LM 11:37
The pervasiveness of it and your earlier point is so important, because we have spoken with some of the descendants of the 272 enslaved people who were sold. And it is such an important community because there, there is this continuousness to the present, and they sort of use the archive to discover their own connections to

Georgetown, but there were so many other enslaved people and I was reading about how Georgetown had sent a group of enslaved people along with a group of Jesuits to St. Louis University to help found the university and how that labor was crucial, both to the very brutal frontier treck, but also then to the founding of the institution of higher education once they got there, I think you also make you draw out a great point of how there's new scholarship that shows how much cities and public institutions profited from renting out enslaved labor, in addition to universities. So I guess I want to ask, you know, I want to turn a little bit to the referendum movement and how it built. I want to pose a question that sort of about what why, why or if do you think the archives are necessary for the reparative justice movement? And also, maybe you could talk about how reparative justice is distinct or related to reparations, and which term is preferable and sort of what are the political balances of each, but I was thinking, there are so many issues that require redress in today's society, it sometimes feels unnecessary to look back hundreds of years to find issues to organize around. But on the other hand, the movement at Georgetown seems to draw strength from those historical archives. And you talk about how those moments in the archives framed your studies at Georgetown. So has this experience shaped the ways you think about the relationship between history and justice?

MM 13:44
It's a big question. I guess like I'll start with, like articulating what I think the relationship between history and justices, I would say that like my time at Georgetown has really been, I'd like three themes. They're like history, social justice, and education. And I think that they're so intertwined with each other. I'm a firm believer in the idea that education is liberatory. And that, what you learn and how you learn, it really frames your trajectory, and also your ability to challenge systems of oppression. And I think that archives are so important for that, because it's like, if these things aren't preserved, and these things are not accessible for people, then it's just no way for you to reach that kind of laboratory education. Additionally, Georgetown's also very interesting, because I think that there's this weird idea that the archives regarding enslavement at Georgetown were somehow like discovered in 2017, like they weren't, like they were not discovered, they had been there for a really long time, and just nobody had addressed them. And so I think that that is one of the really important things about digitization is the fact that it's very easy to put things in a box and put it in a corner of a library and have and the only person only one person knows about it, and nobody really needs to address it, right. But with digitization, it makes it so much more accessible to so many more people where the gatekeeper is in a person who is trying to control a narrative, or not even not controlling narrative, but just like not really care. Because it's so easy for people who are not interested in this issue, or interested in black history, to put this box of documents in a corner somewhere and not care about it. And digitization is just so

important, I think to that process, and also just for individuals to know their own history. And I think that like that's a really interesting thing with genealogical research, like you learned so much, because you want to learn about your own family. And that history is also important. So it's not just about who wrote books, so much of it is like your own history with your own family and like, the personal stories, and I think that that is something that we need to move towards. So that's I think, like my idea of like history and social justice, but I think they're so intertwined, because like you can't change any of these systems that were created 100 years ago, if you don't even know how the system started, and why these systems exist.

LM
Have your-- well, maybe you can also clarify the different balances of reparative. Justice and reparations. and have your ideas about that changed over the course of your connection with this project, in terms of what kinds of solutions would be just, what would be effective? It has it has it changed your ideas about what a full and rich conversation maybe around reparations would include.

MM 16:46
So I'll say that we as a team made a decision to not call it reparations and call it reparative justice instead. And that was a big point of conversation that we had over a long period of time. And like I think that we didn't want to call it reparations because we didn't feel like the institution itself was giving money back. It was students were making the decision to do it. And so I think that if the institution itself had made the decision to use their own money to pay back these descendants, then we would have considered that reparations, but we considered it reparative justice because students are making the decision to do this with their money. I think that the fact that it's students making this decision is makes it a reparative justice effort instead of a reparations because it's not an institution or the system, or the people really who are in power making this decision. It's people who feel that there's a debt that needs to be paid, and they're going to pay it even though it's not necessarily. They're not necessarily speaking for the institution, if that makes sense.

LM
The situation in which I'm more familiar of reparative justice is when, say, a victim of a crime decides to engage in conversation outside of the legal system, so that they can be made whole and then enter into conversations about like how that might be. So that's, that's really, that's really fascinating, in which the students now are being put in conversation with the larger, both historical memory and the contemporary descendants of enslaved people. I guess, can we talk a little bit about you said that, you know, the, the decision to call the movement reparative justice was a point of conversation, I

just want to talk about how the conversations started the group of students that you have worked with, sort of how did the reparative justice movement get going? And what were the situations in which those kind of important conversations happened? Was there a sort of informal, institutional group? And then how did you get your message out to campus.

MM
So I actually, it's interesting, because I wasn't actually a part of the team when the referendum was written. But originally, this idea kind of started because some students who were attending Georgetown actually took a trip to Maringouin, Louisiana, and spoke with descendants there. And there are also some descendants on that trip. And so they had like, very much like an on the ground experience. And we're talking with the descendents, and we're actually descendants who were attending Georgetown talking to descendants and Maringouin, and came back and realize that they were like, this is so much bigger than just talking to other students about it, like something tangible needs to be done in order to repay this debt. And so those students got together with some other students as well. And I created this team. And it was it's really interesting. So the referendum started to be written at the beginning of January, and I joined, like, towards the end of that month, and it was such a diverse group of people. And it still is, I would say, and I think that that allowed the referendum and the way that it's written to be as effective as possible. And I think that it's also one of the most important things that was really centered when running the referendum, Hannah Michel, really spearheaded the writing of the actual text, was just the idea that we really wanted to center the decisions of Descendants and give them as much power to do what they wanted with the money. And I think that that is, I think that that's one of the things that was also just like a really big point of conversation, which is like, how do you make sure that these people have as much control over this money is possible, because it's so important for it to not be charity, it is a debt that is repaid, it is not charity. And so what these people decide to do with their money is completely and utterly up to them. And that is, I think, just one of the most important things about this referendum and any reparative justice effort, like around this area is just like making sure these people are able to do whatever they want with this money, and having not control not trying to have control over this.

LM
So once you've had discussions as a group of students invested in reparative, justice, even having visited Louisiana to meet descendants, and you having worked in the archives, both experiences that brought home the concrete connection between Georgetown and slavery, what was the mechanism for getting the broader campus to engage with it, and eventually to have the campus vote on it?

MM 21:36
So I guess it was written and everything and then it had to pass through the Georgetown University and Student Association, so like it had to go on to the like, student government's ballot ballot had got the ballot. Yeah. So yeah, we basically had to go to these meetings with the Student Association, and convince all of them to vote, that the student body should vote on this. So that was really, really intense, and I think was kind of one of the way one of the first times that we saw the real pushback that students had to the referendum and the idea and a lot of things changed in it. And when it finally passed through the student government, it wasn't the original A bill that had been written at the beginning of January. But it still was true enough to what I think the ideas of the original one were that we felt comfortable with it.

LM
What were some of those conversations like with the representative student body, when you were trying to convince them to put it on the ballot?

MM 22:43
So I think some of them didn't know anything. And so it first was kind of like, Okay, first of all, we have to educate these people on the history of Georgetown. And so it was interesting, because you really did have to kind of like, lay this groundwork of like, why this is important, and then talk about what is going to actually happen tangibly with the money. And I think that another thing that people really had a hard time with was just the idea of not having control over the money after it was given to descendants and and so I think a lot of people were like, Yes, I want to do this, yes, I want to do this. But I want to create all of these measures, in order for us to have to sign off on these decisions that people make with this money. And it's kind of like, it did get to a point where you're like, why do you think that you know, what the best thing is to do with this money as a 19 year olds, student body representative, you know, over these people who like literally are owed this money, period. So I think that that was a really, really hard conversation. And then also, just the idea that like, I, I think it's really hard for people to admit privilege. And the fact that I think one of the biggest things about the reparative justice effort is the fact that every single student at Georgetown who voted on it had to really understand and kind of acknowledge the fact that we wouldn't be able to get Georgetown degrees without these people, no matter where you came from. That's still a privilege that was created because of enslaved people. And so I think that that's a hard thing to because I think people just didn't really want to admit the fact that it was in any way shape or form their responsibility. And so I would always say it was like, it's a football, like, who do you want to pay this? How many times? Are you going to throw this around? Like, do you want all this money to come out of the President's pocket? Like he can make the same argument that

you are that you weren't there and you didn't enslaved people? Right? And so like, yes, like we didn't do that. And President DeGioia didn't either. Neither did the alumni or the Board of Trustees. And so when you keep having that kind of logic, like it turns out that nobody's going to do anything about it.

LM
So you're saying that in some cases, people were reluctant one to vote on it and to maybe even to vote Yes. Because that would be to admit some kind of responsibility?

MM
Yeah. And so I think that also the GUSA hearings were before there was any larger conversation of the student body about this and it really larger conversation with the student body about Georgetown's history with enslavement. And so it was definitely interesting, because I felt like people felt more emboldened to be against the referendum. And then there was a lot more traction, I think, as the conversation started spreading throughout the university, but it was really easy for people to be really against it, because like they didn't have really any knowledge about the history of enslavement at Georgetown. And they really, I mean, reparative justice and reparations were still are and are still kind of controversial. So even people who would say that, like they're very liberal or progressive, like could still easily say, and come up with a lot of different ways to say that the effort was wrong or unfeasible or kind of dangerous.

LM
Well, that's why I think Georgetown is a such an important example is that it has the common campus wide conversation about the referendum has managed to move the question of reparative justice from something discussed, maybe among progressives to something that this the campus, the student body, had to confront, and decide for themselves about. So were you on campus when the referendum happened? Was it a single day?

MM 26:43
So I'll say, well, it was like kind of the longest, like eight weeks of my life. It was so intense, but because really, I think that one of the really hard things about Georgetown is the fact that there's a lot of different circles. And it's very easy to access people within your own circle, but it's very hard to access people who are not, and everybody has such different lived experiences. And also just people don't show up for gasa elections because like they're just not that exciting. And so we really wanted a large turnout because we knew that it was going to go to the board of directors and we did Don't want it to be a small group of people who all voted yes. Because that doesn't really mean anything to like, because if you only have 300 people and they all vote yes, in comparison to 7000 students like it doesn't really mean anything. And then also, I mean, they're like cropped up kind of quickly some people were very anti the referendum. And so we

really had to be very strategic about the ways that we communicated with people. It was very, very intense. He has like, we basically created lists of professors and classes, we reached out to, like so many professors, and we're like, can we just come and speak to your class for 10 minutes and like, I went to biology lectures, chemistry labs, I went to huge lectures for history classes, tiny seminars, I was just like, constantly going, and everybody on our team, he was like, constantly going to people's classes and just doing our like, little 10 minute presentation. Another thing we did at the last two weeks, we ended up door knocking, so we would have people sign up and I created a spreadsheet. It was like, okay, you do this hallway this day, and just like knock on everyone's door, and just give them the spiel. Like it was really, like I talked to so many people. It was kind of crazy. Like, I never talked to that many people at Georgetown before. But it's because like, we had to be so intentional about making sure that we weren't only speaking to the choir, we held a town hall. That was really exciting, because we had students on who were pro and against it, and everybody was having a conversation. And that was covered in the school newspaper. And that definitely got a lot of traction. Social media was a big deal.

LM
So I didn't realize that you had to drum up voters. I mean, it was it's like it's more like an American election. Right, then something where everybody had to decide you had to get people to show up to vote.

MM
Yeah. It was like a campaign. It's actually funny, because I had worked on a political campaign before. And I was like, Okay, this is what we're doing. We listed a bunch of tactics like door knocking, I mean, for example, and tabling and the square and like going to people's classes, like all of that kind of stuff was just, I mean, it was really, really intense.

LM 29:38
So in some cases, in some ways, that that is makes me feel optimistic, because the referendum was an uphill battle all the way. And it was a microcosm of what a larger campaign around voting around reparative justice would be like, which is that you not only have to convince people, persuade them, but you also have to get them to care enough to show up to vote. And at Georgetown, you were successful in doing that, and getting a diverse group of students to come out to vote.

MM
Yeah, I'm pretty sure we have the largest voter turnout of any election for the Student Association. I mean, I that's what I gather. I mean, it was I mean, it was it was a very large group of people. I mean, it, at least over the last decade, like that was the most people that have ever voted in an election, because the voter turnout and I

mean, I rarely vote, but the turnout is really low, typically. And so like we really did kind of have to get people to show up. And they did and they voted like two thirds majority. So I mean, it really did show that like students cared about it. And I mean, it was very hard to argue against that, I think which I was so good for us, I think going into conversation the administration, because they couldn't really deny the fact that the majority, the actual majority of students wanted this.

LM
So two thirds of students voted for the activity fee. But that, from what I understand that referendum has yet to be enacted, what what happened next, after the referendum,

MM 31:15
So I'll say like, the day after the referendum, it was really interesting, because like leading up to it, I think that the administration, like they just thought it was going to fizzle out whether they could ignore it. And honestly, I had no idea that it was going to be such a big story. Like I really, I really didn't know until like, people were calling me on my personal phone from news organizations. And I was like, what is happening like, This is crazy. So all of a sudden, we're all acting like PR agents during the day texting each other and like leaving class to try to do these interviews. But we wanted to do as many as possible just because it's like, that is more and more and more pressure on the university to actually pass it. And we knew going into it that it had to be passed by the board of directors. So we just kind of wanted to have as much pressure as possible on them so they would pass it. We went into the board of directors meeting after the referendum pass after the whole day. And they were very interested. They asked a lot of questions. This was like in June, I guess. We went into another board of directors meeting. They were interested they asked a lot of questions and then Junior fall, we were consistently having conversations with the administration. And they would consistently say they hadn't done anything, they hadn't done anything. They're still working, they're still trying to figure everything out. And then all of a sudden, we came into this meeting at eight o'clock in the morning. And they presented us with this whole plan that they had had no mention of like nobody had asked nobody's opinion on and had been basically lying to us for months saying that they didn't have anything, only to come with this whole proposal that they said they were going to release later that day, in that that was proud of Joy's decision. And we didn't really have any input on the matter. Right. So. And in that, there's a lot of buzzwords, and I think, also really good, really good efforts to like I think that and really necessary efforts of continuing education, memorialization, all these different things that actually take people on the team had been working for before the referendum was even established, like creating mandatory classes, and making sure that it's included in New Student Orientation. There are things in

this proposal that are very important, and I don't want to say that like they're not, but I would say that turning the referendum into charity was a slap in the face, to everybody on the team and to the student body, and honestly, to descendants, because by making that decision to turn it into charity, you are deciding that this is a philanthropy effort, and that this isn't a debt that needs to be repaid. It really did kind of show how they simply not even I think that they did understand what the referendum was about, but they simply like didn't care enough to implement it in the way that we had voted. And it was, yeah, I mean, it was so upsetting. And I think that it's not over. But I think that just the fact that President ajoy would write this whole statement have been meeting with us that morning and decided that they were going to release it four hours later, and have absolutely no conversation with us about it, and also completely kind of destroy the idea of what reparative justice is in the making. I mean, it was it was truly, like rejecting I was so personally was so angry, like so angry.

LM
It's it sounds like it, that did a couple of things. One, it closed the door on those conversations that you were describing the difficult conversations that had been happening from trying to get the student body to put it on the ballot, to the conversations about getting students to vote on it. And so the referendum was seen as powerful by the board of directors, but it was turned into something else, which is a series of proposals that would have otherwise been really good ideas, but ignored the intention of the referendum, which you say was, which was to pay a reparative justice debt, and then let the descendants choose what to do with that money.

MM 35:34
Yeah, I mean, exactly in like, framing it as this idea that it's voluntary. And then people can decide to be a part of this effort and decide to pay back this debt is just so upsetting, because like, that was another thing that we that was big, a big problem with the student body, and that we had to convince them was important, was because people really want it to be a voluntary donation. And we were like, it's not possible. Like you can't have reparative justice, you can't have reparations, if it's voluntary, because like these people whose lives are affected today, and the people who were sold by the Society of Jesus, they that was not a voluntary decision to be enslaved, like that that was forced, you know, so you can't just decide that you want to pay it back, like it's charity or not, or like, that's not a part of your values. Like that's not, that's not what the thing is. And so by making it charity, you're making it voluntary, and you're deciding that people can choose to or choose not to, to be held accountable for this, which means that you're not being held accountable. It means that like nobody's taking responsibility.

LM

And it sounds like you've convinced two thirds of the student body that that was the right position to take and that they had wanted to commit themselves to that. Well, we've covered a lot of ground, I mean, moving from your work in the archives to your work, basically running a political campaign on campus. But to end I just want to ask, you know, is there an element of the student movement, or the stewardship of the archives that we haven't touched on that you think is important to point out, or that you'll take with you as you look toward graduation?

MM 37:21
I'll say what I learned from working on the referendum is, how important it is to have so many different voices in the room. And I think that is also I think, translates to history as well. But I think that it is so important to have so many different voices in the room, because that is how like you create the most comprehensive, and like most ethical work. And I think there's so much that like about ethics that goes into this. But for example, like it on our team, like we had Molly and Shep who were descendants. And we have Allie who worked on that, who had worked on the newspaper, and we had Hannah, who was like helping write the referendum, and people who are descendants of African immigrants and people who are descendants of enslaved people and people who are descendants of the enslaved people from Georgetown, and people who are white, and having so many different voices in the room was just, I think so important that I mean, like, even it's interesting, like, there's a member of our team. And he found out that he was a descendant, because like, somebody had sent him a letter in the mail through the project. And so it wasn't even something that he had known for his whole life, or it wasn't something that like he had had a deep connection to, but because of the research had been done in the archives, like he now had that connection, and I think that that is so important, he would have never known that unless people had been looking in the archives about it. And so yeah, I mean, that's a connection to the archives, it's like, it is so important for people's personal histories, for people's personal identities, and for how we're gonna represent history moving forward, and how you're presented in history books, and how you're presented in the literature that kids ingest. If you don't know anything about this history, until you get to college, your whole like your identity has already been created, like your basis of like your morals, and your values have already been created, what you're interested in is already been pretty much established and like, what does it mean to be just interested in it when you get to college, I think it's so important for this to be so engrained into everything that we think of and not just the history of enslavement, but like the black history in general. And I think that archives are such an important place for that, because of how long those stories have been removed from secondary sources and have been ignored. So I mean, there really is no way to have those conversations, unless people are in archives and are looking at these primary sources, because people have ignored them for years. So to say

that, like we don't need these archives, and we don't need these documents, and we don't need this digitization is completely ignoring the complete lack this huge lack of scholarship on these issues that are my history. So yeah, I mean, I think that's, that's like the things that I've learned. And like, I hope that like I take with me as I leave.

Maya, thank you so much. You're welcome.

LM
My and I kept talking afterwards, and she spoke about her senior thesis, and how she's taken her archival research skills to reach out and inform descendants about what she's learned while researching a plantation that had not formerly had anyone go through its archives. Our informal conversation touched on some aspects of Maya's work in the archive that we hadn't gotten to in the formal part of the podcast. So we include it here.

Our conversation has been wonderful. I've been we've, it's it's been really fascinating. I want to ask you one question, did you interact with any genealogists or when you were working in the archives, like people who were trying to put together their family histories?

MM
I bet. I mean, I bet possibly. But I know that that's Richard Cellini's thing, because he does, like family trees and stuff. But I don't know, I wasn't in the physical archives, and I was there. Because most of the stuff had been digitized by the time that I was going through everything. So like, that had been digitized. And my job was to catalog it.

LM 41:22
You know, there are professional historians who use archives. And then there are also amateur genealogists and i and i think that the, like the Georgetown archive, serves both in a way that not all archives do.

MM
Yeah, it's interesting, because for my I'm working on a thesis right now, and I am tracing the history of the enslaved people at this plantation museum in Richmond, outside of Richmond, Charles City. But I've been using ancestry.com. And my genealogy research can be so helpful for historians, especially just because, I mean, I think my whole take on this paper which has changed a lot, but it's just like, these ideas of people's stories who aren't important, but they're so interesting, and they say so much about culture and like what happened and like history, even though nobody knows their name, and it's just they're just like on a family tree, but I've been reaching, it's interesting, though, because I can reach out to people who also have them on there. family trees. So that's how I've been accessing or have been discussing stuff with descendants. So I've just been like sending

messages on ancestry.com.

LM 42:29
Oh, that's really, that's really interesting. So you've been able to find some living descendants of the people that you're studying. And I guess this is a plantation that also Georgetown owned, or the Jesuits owned?

MM
No, it's not. Okay. So actually, it's interesting, I got interested in it, because they, this planation had written like the family had written a Black Lives Matter statement in June, and I was like, this is really weird that you would write a Black Lives Matter statement, but like run a plantation museum, where you charge people $25 to like, go and walk around this place. And so I took the tour. And it was interesting, because you could tell that they were in this like transition period between not acknowledging slavery, and wanting to acknowledge it, but having no resources to do so. Because like nobody had ever done research. And like, they didn't think it was important. So they can trace their ancestors back to 1500, right, on their family side. And like talk about how Robert E Lee got married there. And so basically, what I ended up doing was just going through their documents, and I found some really interesting stuff. And I'm really excited about it. But I think that the thing is, is like what they were saying a lot on our tours is like we'll never know what what could happen here. But

LM 43:44
that's what's changed is that now, now we know you can know, Richard Cellini said something about that when Georgetown was thinking about renaming one of the buildings Isaac Hall, Hall not being his last name, but the name of a building. And he said it's because they couldn't figure out Isaac's last name. And Richard said, Well, of course, they can figure out Isaac's last name. Like we could do that.

MM
Yeah, it is concerning how easily people were able to say that for so long. Because it's really not that hard. It is, it is really, I think it's really concerning. But it's also just really exciting. Because it's, it's weird, because now I'm like talking to descendants. And I'm like, I can give you all of this information about what your ancestors did. You know, and I'm really excited to be able to, like, share that with people. Because I think it's super valuable. And I it's just interesting, because it's like, I mean, I grew up, I'm a descendant of enslaved people. And I was always kind of told that, like, you can't access any of that information, which I know now isn't true. And I'm going to go back and try to do some more research, but it is I mean, yeah, I mean, it's super empowering, I think.

LM 44:52

Yeah, how archives are. Also more and more archives are being discovered where Adam was talking about how the, the Maryland jazz was archives were the main source I but then the University Archives had a lot of names of enslaved people. And it's a matter of going back and using them for a different purpose and linking different archives together. Because I think you're right it for a long time there is this it's too hard people we can't know. And now. Now Now there are either the archival tools and the digitalization or just the intellectual rigor and interest that are unearthing all these answers.

MM
Yeah, and I think that digitization has done so much just because like, being able to search people's names, I think, like on family search, like it's just, I mean, it's a huge difference from going through an 1000 page document, to being able to search for somebody's name and getting all of the pages that they're on. I mean, it's just so it's such a big deal, but I'm really excited about how stuff is going now. I hope I can be involved in it.

LM
I'm sure you will. Thanks so much, Maya

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