

EM 0:04

I think another way in which the archival record was connected was that students thanks to archives knew that reparations were possible. And slavers were repaired for their loss in Washington DC. And there there are records of that. And that is also one of the one of the arguments that a lot of students use. You can go online to civil war Washington and we we put up some of the petitions that are related to the history of Georgetown online. There were enslavers that were members of the School of Medicine at Georgetown, doctors that were professors that received compensation from the federal government because of the people that they had enslaved. So that is also a way in which archives really important to this conversation to like show you this is actually possible.

LM 1:04

In the spring of 2019, Georgetown students voted overwhelmingly to approve an activity fee as one of the nation's first concrete steps towards reparations. In the months leading up to the vote, the debate consumed campus, and archival documents from the Georgetown library became key pieces of evidence that were replicated, blown up and posted around campus. Welcome to Episode Three of overdue a podcast that examines how archives are informing social change today. It's hosted by me, Lina Moe, and my colleague, Thai Jones, curator for American history at Columbia University's Rare Book and manuscript library. Today we speak with Elsa Mendoza, a historian and former graduate student who was teaching at Georgetown at the time, she was also the assistant curator for the Georgetown slavery archives.

EM 1:56

One of the documents from the archives that I saw often that students used to sit for the students that were in favor of the referendum, the ones that proposed it was the big census of the sale. And it has a list of names, full names of 272 people that were sold. So I would see, for example, in the library, they would paste it in stairs, you know, where you can put, you know, if you want to rent an apartment or something, they would put this or they actually, the day before the referendum. I remember I was on campus late, and someone had chalked all of these names in on the floor in big big letters at Georgetown, we have an area that's called Red Square. And there is usually where students have a lot of the debates and activities that have to do with any sort of political activity if they want to run for president and so on. So there you could see all of the names of the people that were sold in 1838 on the floor, he could not ignore this history. And I know that for a lot of them, you know, the archive was very important.

LM 3:02

The archive came to life in student hands. And it was also used by the descendant community as members track down ancestors. In some parts of the descendant community began to negotiate with the Jesuits about reparations, Elsa often saw descendants in the library,

EM 3:17

members of the descendent community, I've often found them in the archive, they go and look for documents related to the history of their families, I've met some in the archive, because we were sometimes sharing the same documents, you know, we were we had called up the same box. So once they finished using the ledgers from a plantation, then I would I would be able to look at them. So it has been a space I think, not only where like they can learn more about their families, but also a space of reconciliation in some way. Because we we talk about this history and what we are trying to do with it in the case of the Georgetown slavery archive,

LM 4:01

The Georgetown slavery archive has become a space where that question is very much alive one. What do we want to do with this history. The archive was transformed in important ways before it could be utilized by students and descendants in the way that it is today. documents were transcribed from their difficult to decipher 19th century handwriting into a format that was easy to read and search. They were put online, and they were also redescribed. Part of what we talked to Elsa about today is how the way archives are described shapes the kind of research that is done with them. Finding aids are like maps to an archive. They tell researchers what is in a collection and give a sense of how the components of a collection fit together. But while finding aids can be guides, they can also act like camouflage. What Elsa found was that the description of the slavery archive was often an exercise in looking away.

EM 4:54

I remember the first week that I arrived that was given the finding aid for the Maryland province archives and There were only a handful of documents that mentioned that they were related to, to enslaved people. And I was like this cannot be so I mean, the the finding, they did not even have documents listed related to the sale of 1838. And we already knew that there were significant documentation on the fact, so I was quite struck by the fact that even when the finding eight was created, we weren't interested in looking at it.

LM 5:33

In our wide ranging conversation, we touch on some of the stories Elsa unearthed in the archive conversations among priests about the sale, recounted voices of enslaved people, and how students react to reading these firsthand accounts. It is often a transformative experience for students to see what is in the archive, what was overlooked, and even purposely buried, and how deep the ties run, linking the university to slavery.

Welcome Elsa Mendoza to the podcast. Thai and I are excited to chat with you. Just to get started, can you tell us about your dissertation

work at Georgetown and your position at the archive?

EM 6:19

Thank you. I'm very happy to be here. My dissertation looks into the history of slaveholding. at Georgetown University at Georgetown's campus, It examines the lives of people that were enslaved at the school so instead of focusing on plantations, which has been the normal focus that historians have had when they've dealt with the history of Georgetown University and slavery, my dissertation examines how people labored in slavery at the school since the school began in 1792, up until 1862, just a month before the passage of the compensated emancipation act in the District of Columbia. And since 2017, I have been very happy to be involved with the Georgetown slavery archive, I have been its assistant curator, we know usually find documents that are related to my dissertation. And then we put them up there online, we transcribe them and put them up so that anyone that is interested in this history, can be able to access this information, which I think it's a crucial element that connects the archives, and social and reparative justice issues together. Because there are barriers of information in by putting this information out there anyone that wants to find a bit more about your family, for example, or the history of slavery at the university can just, you know, log on to the internet and look at our website.

TJ 7:48

So you arrived in 2017. And you just tell us a little bit about where the conversations were about the research into the history of Georgetown and enslavement? And how broad on campus were conversations around this history?

EM 8:07

Well, I arrived on campus and started my PhD in 2014. So in 2016, I think it became part of the national news, the conversation that, you know, there revealed that Georgetown had sold 272 enslaved people to help pay some of its debts. On campus, the student newspaper, for example, published a series of expos on this. And I thought that there was one of the most interesting developments of this history, how students were really the motivators for the changes that we've seen on campus and change of building names and so on. They discovered this history in the archive, they went to the archive to do research. And then they published it in their newspaper, it kind of forcing the administration to deal with a history, that it's in the books that deal with the history of slavery at Georgetown, but that the institution itself has never really recognized or dealt with it in public. So it was quite interesting to see these developments. I also find that quite surprising, to be honest, that people themselves were surprised that the Jesuit were slaveholders, the Jesuit order, enslaved 1000s of people all across the world, in the Americas, in Africa and in Asia. So the fact that we as a community have decided to ignore this speaks to some blindness that we have about, you know,

tragic issues, and issues of race. In the Catholic Church, for example.

LM 9:43

One of the connections we're making in the podcast is between Georgetown, and Brown and Columbia and other universities dealing with their own history of either enslavement or profiting from enslavement. But you just mentioned the international dimension of the Jesuits as another institution that profited from enslavement. Can you talk a little bit about that, put it in a broader context?

EM 10:06

I researched the history of slavery on campus, and the way that I talked to people about it that this is just like a tiny chain in a broader chain of enslavement that connects all of the Atlantic world. We cannot understand the development of Jesuit universities as a project that we now know, that's focused on social justice and inclusivity and that are great universities all across the world without understanding that Jesuit universities, since the first universities in Europe when the order was founded, in the 16th century, were involved in the business of slavery, enslaved people, in their campuses used enslaved laborers to serve both priests and students. So there is an international dimension to the history of slavery at Georgetown because of its religious affiliation, that we don't necessarily see in other universities in the United States, and it speaks to broader issues about how higher education itself, you know, the idea of going to university is related to slavery, to discrimination to the creation of human capital, at the expense of bodies that are being enslaved.

TJ 11:28

I've often thought that there really shouldn't be anything too surprising about institutions in a slave system being implicated in slavery. So here we have two examples, universities and religious orders, where there clearly is something especially troubling about discovering their ties to enslavement. In contrast, I'd say to shipping firms, railroad firms, insurance companies, entities from which we naturally expect the worst. So do you think that there's a question of contemporary perceptions of these institutions, or what makes the ties between universities and churches and enslavement, so provocative to people today?

EM 12:14

I think that it is difficult, it is difficult for me to understand as a historian, how a Jesuit priest, for example, can baptize someone, in the next day, sell them. How they, they can see them, as you know, individuals that are part of the body of Christ, according to their religion, and at the same time, as chattel property, as objects that

can be bought and sold. So I think that's something that captures the imagination. And that also troubles us. So as you say, we expect these types of like transactional relationships, from banks, from shipping firms from plantation owners, but we don't associate priests or professors, professions that we associate with something good, with something so evil. So I think in a sense, it's not only that institutions have been willfully blind about this, but that us as a society, have not questioned these institutions enough, because we associate them with something good.

TJ 13:19

Yeah, so it's sort of the claims that we make about ourselves and academia that when this history is revealed, I think forces us and really demands that we address them in a way that's really reflective and and takes this matter seriously. In a sense, the outrage is directly proportionate to what we tell people we're doing in these institutions. So we have a responsibility to address them, and so do other social institutions. But there's something about the nexus of education, which, as you say, is seen as a positive so often, and this history that is really troubling, especially I think, to students who arrive at college campuses, so idealistic, so enthusiastic, often with so much of their self tied to the institution that they've chosen to attend.

LM 14:12

And the contradictions we hold about ourselves are visible in the Georgetown archives also. One of the conditions of the sale of the 272 enslaved people was that they be provided with the opportunity to continue practicing their Catholic faith. Because many of the 272 sold to Louisiana were practicing Catholics. And the archive at Georgetown contains letters of people who years later went down to the plantation at Maringouin and found that those conditions had been violated. But what's remarkable is not that the conditions were violated, but the delusion that this was written into the sale document, as though the priests could both sell people and look out for their spiritual well being.

But to turn to the archive, more, particularly at Georgetown, Elsa, how were you introduced to them? And what did you come to Georgetown? planning to do? Did you anticipate using the archives before you arrived as a grad student?

EM 15:17

I never imagined that I was going to end up studying this, that that was not one of the reasons that that I came to Georgetown and I was actually introduced to the archival work related to the history of the university because you know, as a graduate student you usually have trouble finding funding in the summer. So I was hired as a summer researcher, along with some other colleagues. And our mission really

was to try and find as many documents as we could in the archive related to the history of the 272 people that were sold in 1838. We explored-- my colleagues and I-- both the Maryland province archives of the Society of Jesus, which are the guests with archives that are hosted at Georgetown University Special Collections and also Georgetown University's financial archives to try and see, for example, how money from the sale ended up in Georgetown's coffers because you know, there's a bit of a strange triangulation. The people that were sold were enslaved by the Jesuits-- the Jesuits had their own financial books-- then they sent money to Georgetown University who had their own financial books and their own archives. So that is how I ended up doing this archival work.

I remember the first week that I arrived that was given the finding aid for the Maryland province archives. And I got the word document so that I could search it. And there were only a handful of documents that mentioned that they were related to, to enslaved people. And I was like this cannot be so I mean, the finding aid did not even have documents listed related to the sale of 1838. And we already knew that there were significant documentation on the fact. So I was quite struck by the fact that even when the finding aid was created, we weren't interested in looking at it.

And one of the reasons why I became so involved in this project and even changed, what I was going to do for my doctoral work was because of a document that I found in the archive, it was a letter, you know, I was frustrated that the finding aid was not really going to help me so I started to look box by box by box of correspondence. As I told myself, you know, priests are probably sharing gossip or something of the sword with each other, we might be able to find information here. So it was a letter from European priests that was visiting a plantation. And the letter it was catalog, like some sort of, you know, financial affairs of the mission. But in the letter, actually, about three quarters of the document was this priest sharing with another priest that he had recently visited a plantation and asked an enslaved woman named Suki if she had ever been beaten up by someone if a Jesuit priest had punished her or whipped her. And he tells how Suki shared with him-- Suki was already an old woman-- that when she was young, the plantation manager. One day she saw him self flagellating in his room. So Suki saw him through the window and she became scared for his well being and tried to stop him, told him not to stop hurting himself, and that this priest as a punishment, decided to whip her in his room. And then Suki tells the priest that's writing the letter that she received a dreadful whipping for my curiosity. I was I mean, I was quite emotional after reading this document. And also quite surprised that when someone else saw it, they decided to catalog it as something else. Like here we had through, you know, some act of historical ventriloquism because it's not really her words. It's the retelling of a Jesuit priest of how she spoke. But we have the words of a woman who was abused by her enslaver, who was also a man who gave

her religious sacraments. And when this document was catalogued, no one thought it worthwhile to mention that you can find her words there. So that was like one of like, I think that the most that experience I had the most impact my life as a historian, and why I decided to ended up you know, researching this, because I thought that Suki's name should be out there. She is part of this history. She had a voice. We know very little about her. But she should at least be recognized as part of this harrowing history that connects universities with such tragedies.

LM 20:16

When you are when you're teaching out of the archive, is that a document that you share with students? And how do you introduce something like that? That is it's such an important historical truth. And it's so it's so moving and horrific. How do you introduce that in the classroom? And how do students respond to it mean?

EM 20:38

Well, first, I tried to tell students that we're going to talk about something very difficult and you know, there should be some trigger warning because in itself, it can trigger in us an emotional reaction that might make it difficult to deal with. I always tell students that studying slavery will make us feel uncomfortable, and that sometimes we will want to cry that there's no issue with that. I share that after reading that document, I got out of special collections and went to bathroom and cried, because I thought it was horrible. But that does not make me like less of a researcher. It makes me human. And we need to understand that even so it's not always present in documents. violence was an everyday occurrence in institution of slavery, and that in the case of these women that were enslaved by the Jesuits with, there's also some hidden truths behind these documents. We don't know what happened besides that Suki was whipped, for example. So we also need to question the silences of the archive.

This document was the first document that I put up online and the Georgetown Slavery archive, it was my first contribution. You know, it's up there, everyone can, can read it. It's also legible in handwriting. And I always like and invite students to look at these documents and to question like, what else can we learn and what else is hidden out there? Just the fact that this document was not described, the way that I would hope that it was described in the finding aid also makes us question what else is out there that us as researchers can find and how we can change as well how the history of a woman like Suki can be told. I always invite them also to like, try and tell this history, you know, we have the words of the priest. What if we like switched it and told this history of Jesuits enslaving people from the perspective of an woman like Suki that is also something that I always grapple with, in my research. And I always tried to bring up the testimony of a lot of men or women who'd never

really weren't even named in the archives, but that we must try and find a way to recognize

TJ 22:56

One of the most powerful I think, opportunities for students in the archives is to discover moments like that in the documents where they are forced to see or allowed to see how many other researchers potentially came across that document and chose not to include it in their research. It allows students to, I think, gain the confidence to make their own interventions into historical conversations when they actually start to see that generations of librarians and archivists and scholars have been-- putting it charitably-- uncurious about these documents. But I think we know that there's been many active instances of erasure and denial, and to have an undergraduate go through a folder that has documents like that, I know that people who have written histories of Georgetown have likely seen that document and chosen not to include it is I think, such a powerful, historic graphic lesson for students to see just how imperfect and flawed other historical interpretations have been.

I'd love to hear you talked a little bit more about students and archives. I don't know if you can generalize about the trajectory of an undergraduate coming in contact with these documents. I imagine they begin with pretty significant barriers and anxieties. And perhaps you could tell us about some of those trajectories you've seen or where you hope that their learning outcomes end up in?

EM 24:29

Well, I know that, for example, in classes, students are taken to special collections to read up for themselves, see, the documents of the sale, see a big census with all of the names of the people that were sold, look at the ages that some of them are like infants, then for one or two years old, or some people were as old as 80 years old when they were sold from their homes and sent to Louisiana. Another way that students have contact with these documents is through the Georgetown Slavery Archive, which I often find is more more accessible, because you don't have to, like make an appointment to go to special collections. And sometimes students find it intimidating to be with the physical document, like can I touch it? Is this allowed? So I think the first introduction usually for them is what they see in the Georgetown slavery archives. And that gives them also more confidence. And I found students when I was doing my dissertation work, that for a paper or just because they were interested, they made an appointment by themselves to look at these boxes, and to learn more about this history. And I think that this has been really integral in elevating the student consciousness about these issues, especially the group of students that were involved when their buildings changed names. Those students were deeply involved in archival research.

Another way that I've tried to involve students or to like make this

history more visible is to for example, do posters of documents and put them up across campus highlighting the name of a person that is reflected in the document to bring a human face to the narrative. So I talk, for example, put a sacramental record that deals with a woman named Margaret Smallwood, who was enslaved as a laundress on Georgetown's campus, and who actually passed away on campus, and is buried now underneath one of the campus buildings, because that used to be a cemetery. So those are also ways in which students become curious and then go to the archive.

When students started to debate, the referendum and the passage of you know, an initiative that dealt with reparations, I saw that the groups that were both in favor and against used archival documents, either at the Georgians Slavery archive, or that they were involved in, going by themselves to the archives and trying to find evidence, and then put that information online like, or put that information and QR codes that they would paste in different paid places on campus. So you're interested about this history, you don't believe what I say, Well, why don't you like scan the QR code and see that what we're telling you is actually connected to the document. So that's really a spectacular development that speaks of the ways that archival repositories can connect with students and make them you know, more conscious of these issues. I was really quite surprised to see all of these developments. And I hope that in the future students don't don't forget, I know that the university is starting to do for example, courses that have to do with this issue so that there's intergenerational knowledge, and hopefully, they will continue to be involved with the archive.

LM 27:58

That's really amazing how the archive entered into the public forum on campus that students were actually saying, Look, here. Here's the concrete, physical evidence on our side of the argument. I think one thing that Thai and I really wanted to know is exactly that is how the archive kind of bled into the conversations on campus leading up to the referendum, both the informal conversations that maybe happened in the cafeteria in public spaces, as well as what I understand were some of the more formal conversations that students had to make in order to get the referendum on the ballot in order to be voted on. Could you just talk a little bit about some of the conversations that you saw happen and how the material archive was deployed as, as either evidence or as a register for moral authority.

EM 28:55

One of the documents from the archives that I saw often that students used to sit for the students that were in favor of the referendum, the ones that proposed it was the big census of the sale just document is actually significantly big because sin an oversized box, and it has a list of names or names of 272 people that were assault. So I would see for example, in the library, they would paste it in stairs, you know, where you can put you know, if you want to rent an apartment or

something, they would put this or they actually, the night before the day before the referendum. I remember I was on campus late, and someone had chalked all of these names in on the floor. I can bake big big on at Georgetown, we have an area that's called Red Square because you know, it has brakes and they look red. And there is usually where students have a lot of the debates and activities that have to do with any sort of political activity if they want to run for president and so on. So there you go. See all of the names of the people that were sold in 1838 on the floor, he could not ignore this history. And I know that for a lot of them, you know, the archive was very important. And they use to Georgetown slavery archive. I know, for example, Adam Rothman, who was the who is the principal curator of the archive, he was an invited on multiple occasions in some of the town halls that students had, so that he could speak more about what documents were out there. And in a lot of the newspaper articles, editorials that students wrote, they also referenced documents that were either in the Georgetown cyber archive, or that they had actually gone and seen for themselves that special collections, Special Collections was very busy. During those days, I remember I was doing my dissertation research. So I would be there from like, 9am to 5pm every day, and there were a lot of students coming and going. So it was it was quite, it was quite a happy occurrence to see the place obey see that I was quite happy about that. I do

TJ 31:07

have one this is off this off track. But I wonder if you mentioned the use of archives by students. And I'm I know that one of the really special elements of the Georgetown. And enslavement story is is about the descendant community. And I wonder if you've interacted with with members of that community and talk to him about the archives are sort of seeing them using the archives and how these documents have impacted them more than anyone else, they would have this type of personal connection to these documents you found,

EM 31:44

Yes,... the members of the descendent community I've often found them in in the archive, they go and look for documents related to the history of their families, I've met some in the archive, because we were sometimes sharing the same documents, you know, we were, we had called them the same box. So once they finished using the ledgers from a plantation, then I would, I would be able to look at them. So it has been a space I think, not only where like, they can learn more about their families, but also a space of reconciliation in some way. Because we we talk about this history, and what we are trying to do with it in the case of the Georgetown slavery archive. I've also, we've also put up documents related to the sale to groups of Descendants that have visited Georgetown, so that they can see the documents for all of the documents related to the sale. I know that when there was a ceremony that the Jesuit order apologized that members of the descendant community that they also visited special

collections, to see the documents. And I've also known people that for example have traveled from Southern Maryland, that are descendants that still live in areas that weren't in the same area that their ancestors lived, that are now trying to create community museums, about this history and have often gone to special collections to try and figure out more about like the history of the place where their ancestors were enslaved, and where they were born, where they're still living, you know, what is the history of that community. And members from Georgetown University special collections have tried to collaborate with them, helping them also create their own community archives, because they and their churches have a lot of documents related to the history of that particular congregation. So there's also been spaces to collaborate with descendants, so that they are able to, in some ways, start cataloging their own history. And I found that also like quite special to be able to collaborate in those projects.

So it's, I think it's one of the most rewarding things to to be able to speak with members of the descendant community, I think that when you know, you decide to become historian, you never think that you're going to be in contact that people that are us with people that are associated with the past that you study. So it's quite quite an experience. And I hope, for example, that some of the people that I found, the people that are found at Georgetown that one they are able to find their descendants. I know of many names of people that were enslaved on campus. And my hope is to one day be able to find the people that are descended from them so that we can talk about them.

LM 34:42

It seems like also, in addition to the descendant community, that genealogists have become increasingly interested in using Georgetown archive using some of the community archives that you described. And I'm curious also, about how you imagine archives might become more available and accessible to researchers who aren't professional academics. So there's the story you told about re examining the finding aid is incredibly interesting. And it's really interesting in the context of 20th century archival practices and processing practices. But it's not something that would necessarily fit into an intuitive understanding of how you know the processing of archives works and how it's changed over time. The amateur user of the archive might have difficulty parsing that. So I wonder if in your role as an assistant curator if you've thought about new archival practices that might make these really important archives that have possibly repercussions for living people more accessible to those users.

EM 35:52

The Georgetown slavery archive tries to make documents accessible both by transcribing them. And by digitizing them. I think the transcription part is a very important part in terms of accessibility, some of the documents that we deal with not written in English, are

written in other languages like French, or Latin or Italian, which, you know, further creates barriers to be able to understand them. And as well, sometimes they're practically illegible. So transcription, I think is one of the issues that in the case of digital archives, I think it's a great tool for accessibility, digitizing documents as well, I think it's one of the turns that I see that in the case of the Georgetown Slavery Archive, and special collections at Georgetown, they are now trying to digitize most of the financial records from Georgetown University at that time, so that if people are interested to learn more about this history, they can look at these documents from their homes, they don't have to carry the gigantic ledgers and, you know, get themselves full of dust to find this history. And what we're trying to do as well and I've collaborated with them is create some sort of preliminary finding names of lists, so that in this document, you can find reference to these people. Margaret, who was enslaved at the college, Ben, who was enslaved at the college, highlighting something that otherwise would not have been highlighted in a different finding it

LM 37:26

And putting the people forward putting the proper names up front.

EM 37:30

Yes, the people are forward in this history and in the way that the documents are being like preliminary, cataloged online, if there is the name of an enslaved person in a ledger, you can see it in the finding aid so that you know where to go. And I think that also is increasing the potential of access of these documents. I know that in the case of the Jesuits, they're also trying to recatalog, a log all of the material from the Maryland province archives, which is up I think it's going to be a project that will take at least three years, they're now ongoing and trying to re catalog all of these, I think it's over 150 boxes of materials. So that Suki's letter actually mentioned Suki and the finding aid instead of just the issues with with the province. So those are things that I see as developments at Georgetown to try and increase the accessibility of these documents. I do sometimes worry though, that, for example, when we put something online like the Georgetown Slavery Archive, we are actually we are a filter, we decide what is up there. So we're creating a filtered view of this archival world. The documents that we think are important are the ones that are up there. And some people are creating databases or you know, digital maps, and so on and inventories. And I always wonder about what are the implications of that. When you're using like big data and tables? Are we just repeating the inventories of the 19th century, but in a digital way. So I think those are also issues, that when it comes to archives and accessibility and putting things online that we need to reflect on, because it is important to you know, know the number of people that were enslaved somewhere, but we should not just repeat the quantification that we see in the 19th century with inventories, that is something that I continually grapple with, how

can I make this history accessible, easy to search, easy to find, and at the same time, respect the humanity and individuality of the subjects that are being dealt with in these documents. And that is something that I assume every archivist

TJ 40:04

that's a really interesting point and something I was talking about in other contexts the other day, it's such a That's involved in this will continue to grapple with in the next few years. Hopefully, that's a really interesting point and something I was talking about in other contexts the other day, it's such a fraught question of reproducing the power imbalances of the archives. And then, of course, the alternative or one alternative strategy of trying to narrow devise people's lives with imperfect information we also know is deeply fraught. So it's definitely an undertaking that needs to be done with humility and, and caution.

We haven't really talked about reparative. Justice and reparations. You mentioned how Georgetown was international news. And in part it was it was because of the referendum on reparations for descendants. I'd love to hear your thoughts about the connection in this case between the archival record and that vote and then the I'm sure surprising, global interest in the outcome. On the one hand, Georgetown had this possibly unique some people would think that it's more widespread than than we know, set of documents that allowed researchers to trace enslaved people who were sold by the institution to their descendants. And thus, the archive allowed for a really concrete conversation about reparations. On the other hand, perhaps that's too high a bar for a conversation around, much needed reparative justice movement that really does need to involve everybody, you know, everyone of African descent whose ancestors were enslaved, and even, you know, others who have families have been subjected to Jim Crow and white supremacy over the years. So seems like there's two ways to look at the connection between archives and reparations. And I'd love to hear your thoughts about those questions: is it a really powerful tool or, you know, some have said that it's distraction and actually might be harming a movement that that would have its as its end or a national reparations bill, for instance? question of reproducing the power imbalances of the archives. And then, of course, the alternative, or one alternative strategy of trying to narrow devise people's lives with imperfect information we also know is deeply fraught. So it's definitely an undertaking that needs to be done with humility and, and caution. We haven't really talked about reparative. Justice and reparations, you mentioned how Georgetown was international news. And in part it was it was because of the referendum on reparations for descendants. I'd love to hear your thoughts about the connection, in this case between the archival record and that vote, and then the, I'm sure surprising, global interest in the outcome. On the one hand, Georgetown had this possibly unique, some people would think that it's more widespread than than we

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EM 42:12

Yeah, I think that archives were really important and like sparking the conversation at Georgetown, and also sparking the imagination of students in not necessarily the archives at Georgetown. But when students came to realize the amount of Descendants that are out there, of the people that were sold in 1838, I think that archival work, people being able to trace themselves to this sale, the amount of people that there are, and that is genealogical work that has been happening in, in Louisiana, and by other entities, including descendant associations, I think that that archival work is crucial, because again, it puts a human face to these issues. It's completely different to just talk, you know, slavery and numbers, but to put a human face, I think, sparked something in a lot of students, and also a lot of students that were involved in this referendum at the school, at least two or three were actually descendants. So that also, you know, adds a layer to how the archive is connected to this, I think at least two or three of them. were part of the first group of students that had admission at Georgetown after the news broke out of the sale of 272 in 1838. So I think that is a way in which archives sparked the conversation. I was pretty happy when the when the when the students voted and quite surprised to be honest of the results.

I think another way in which the archival record was connected, was that students thanks to archives knew that reparations were possible. Enslavers were repaired for their loss in Washington, DC. And there, there are records of that. And that is also one of the one of the arguments that a lot of students used. You can go online to civil war, Washington and we we put up some of the petitions that are related to the history of Georgetown online. There were enslavers that were members of the School of Medicine at Georgetown, you know, doctors that were professors that received compensation from the federal government because of the people that they had enslaved. So that is also a way in which archives really important to this conversation to like showing this is actually possible. It has that it has been done before. Simply that the people that were repaired for the damage, were

not the people that were enslaved, that sparked a conversation that I think it's ongoing to see that this has been done before, and that there are restraints, they're trying to find new ways or are other ways in which reparations have worked in other contexts. I know that there has been classes at Georgetown that look into the international view of reparations, and they use archival work, I really hope that this conversation goes somewhere, and that we don't end up in just the theoretical possibilities of it. But in the case of Georgetown, I know that a lot of things have to happen and that the decisions that the students make in their own governance are non-binding. So the administration in the case of the university, decided to just ignore, the board of directors they decided to, they create their own entity to begin a series of reparative justice initiatives, ignoring what the students had wanted, which was a fee. But it's going to be part of the archival record, eventually that the students voted at some point and hopefully, if things are not fixed, you know, some years from now students will be able to look at the archives of the student newspaper and see what past students have done about this.

LM 46:07

What was the resolution? What was the the actual what was on the ballot that the students voted on?

EM 46:14

The students voted that in the fees that students have to pay undergraduate students, that they would add a fee of \$27.20. You know, because of the 272, they tried to find a number that had some significance so that they would add this fee and that from this fee, you know, with all the undergraduates that Georgetown has, they would create a fund, and that this fund would be administered by members of a board that included members of the descendant community and students, and that through this they would be able to create community projects that this members of the descend the community could come and say, I want the initial funding to try and build this try and do this in the community. I think one of the arguments on this was that Georgetown's ideas, for example of offering legacy admission, really had no impact on the everyday lives of most descendants. Most descendants argued, maybe building a high school would have more of an impact for us, if you built the house, a high school in Marin, Gwyn, Louisiana, where a lot of them recite, instead of offering us preferential admission to a university that might we might not even want to go. So that by creating this fund, descendants would actually have a say, in how is it that reparative justice would happen, because, you know, they would be involved in the board. And also, they could create their own petitions for it. So it will be something that's individual based on the needs of different people. So that is, that was the project that the students had, but to actually, you know, take the fees from a student, you need the administration to do it. And that is why the initiative at the end has not been implemented to this day.

LM 48:15

Right. As I understand it, one of the one of the key aspirations of the student movement was to create a fund that would be controlled by the descendants, or it sounds like the governance would be joint between this the students and the descendants. And therefore, one of the great frustrations about the suite of reforms proposed by the Georgetown administration was not so much the content of the reforms, some of which were welcomed as good steps forward, including ways to continually inform new students as they entered campus, the history of enslavement, but rather, the administration of these reforms was going to be totally top down was was not going to involve either student governance or the control of the the descendant community.

EM 49:19

Yes, I think that there has been a continual frustration that this has always been a top down movement. That has always been, you know, based on what the administration wants or considers. The descendent community I know, at some point was also frustrated, because when the university implemented their working group to research this history, the descendent community was not involved in this, which I found quite surprising when I found that but yes, that there has been, you know, a view that only the administration can decide when this is actually a problem that involves more groups besides the administration. And I think that, by creating that fund, the the students were hoping to take back a bit of that control, and also involve the members of the descendant community in the administration of the fonts that were supposed to be to benefit them.

LM 50:15

I just wanted to close by asking if you think that there are other ingredients in this nexus of the archive and the student social movement that has had some frustrations, but it's still ongoing, and I think students still have a lot of hope around it. I guess, if there were any sort of ingredients that you think we missed that are important to point out?

EM 50:37

Well, I would always point out that archivists are important and like integral to this. I know that in the case of Georgetown, both the archivists that work at the Booth Family Center for special collections have been great resources for students. They have been great resources for us as researchers, you know, when we come with them with questions, I remember one time I asked the archivist for Georgetown, are there any infirmiry records and she was able to find them, even though weren't really well-cataloged. I think archivists are essential to this, you know, going to an archive as a student, at least in my experience that I know that a lot of undergraduates feel the same way can be an intimidating experience. Dude, there, you feel that you can't make noise. You're going to break the documents, but to

have like a friendly archivists and archivists that has the disposition to help you, and that will really make your work better, is integral. And in the case of Georgetown, I think the institution is pretty fortunate to have great archivists that have always been resources to both students and to graduate students and professors. And I think that without them, we couldn't really do the work that we did.

TJ 51:49

Great. Well, I'm looking at the clock and so I think we can wrap this up. Elsa Mendoza, thank you so much for joining us this morning. This has been really interesting to hear about your work with the archives at Georgetown.

EM 52:04

Thank you. I was happy to be here and I look forward to listen to the finished product.

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