

TJ 0:00

Welcome to overdue, a podcast about archives, history, and politics. I'm Thai Jones, curator for American history at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library. In this inaugural season, we are examining the legacies of one of the darkest moments in the history of slavery in America. In 1838, the Maryland Jesuits who operated Georgetown University, among numerous other concerns, conducted one of the largest sales of enslaved people in American history. Nearly 300 people were sold, mostly to plantations in Louisiana. The legacy of this tragedy has been at the center of Georgetown University politics for nearly a decade. Students, faculty, alumni, and descendants of the enslaved people sold in 1838 have all engaged in research, activism, and community building in the hopes of finding some meaningful form of reparative justice in response to this history. In this episode, my co-host and colleague Lina Moe, and I will be speaking with Adam Rothman, a professor of history at Georgetown, who is a member of the university's Working Group on Slavery, Memory and Reconciliation, and also the principal curator of the Georgetown Slavery Archive. One thing Professor Rothman said struck me as especially revealing. He describes the "joy" of doing this work of archival investigation. On the one hand, Joy seems incongruous for a subject matter so filled with tragedy and injustice. There is no joy in the documents themselves. And in several of our interviews, people described the deep, deep pain they felt in their encounters with the archival past. The joy I think Rothman is talking about here is the excitement and power of using documents to discover past injustices, of introducing students and the public to this process, and to its findings, and in working with the community to imagine a better future. So, thank you for joining Lina and me, and our guest, Adam Rothman, for this overdue conversation.

TJ 2:18

I'm Thai Jones and I'm joined as always by Lina Moe, and we're really thrilled to be talking to Adam Rothman today. So, as Lina has said, this is part of a podcast on the connections between archives and reparations. So I know a lot has been written about the Georgetown reparations story, both the historical and the contemporary part. But I think that the centrality of the archives and the research processes remains a little bit underrepresented. But nevertheless, my first questions are about the history of the 1830s. And, you know, I imagine, since you've done so much work on this story for the past many years that the actual event of the sale of the enslaved people of the 272, and more enslaved people by the Jesuits in the 1830s has featured so largely, in your mind, in your research in your work. So I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about that event, and how you kind of imagine it looking, like the scenes that you think of from that moment, and, and maybe also what the documents tell us, but really, I'm hoping you can just kind of share with us your mental picture of of that event, that moment itself.

AR 3:39

Thanks Thai. Well, it's really a pleasure to be talking about this history, and the slavery memory and reconciliation project at Georgetown, with you. Just as a historian, one of the real joys, I think of doing this work has been my collaboration with the archivists and librarians at Georgetown, to excavate this material and make it better known to the public. So I really appreciate the emphasis on the role of archives in all of this.

When we think about this infamous sale of almost the entire enslaved community owned by the Maryland Jesuits in 1838. I think it's helpful to think of it first of all, in a broad historical context as an illustration of something that was going on all the time and had deep roots in American history. You know, I often say that the story of Georgetown the Jesuits in slavery is really a microcosm of the whole history of American slavery. And you can see that very clearly at different points, but at no point can you see it more clearly than in the sale of 1838. So for those of your listeners who may not be entirely familiar with the story, the background is that the Jesuits who ran Georgetown University also operated several plantations across Maryland that used enslaved labor. The original idea was that the profits from those farms and plantations would help to subsidize the Jesuit churches and schools like Georgetown. But by the 1820s, the plantations really weren't making any money. And the Jesuits were trying to think about reorienting their whole operations away from the countryside into cities like Washington, DC, Philadelphia and New York. So they had a long debate about what to do about their human property. And that debate culminates in the 1830s with a decision to sell off almost the entire community and take the profits and reinvest them in other activities. So after various negotiations, looking around for buyers weathering the economic crisis of 1837, the leader of the Maryland Jesuits, who had also been the president of Georgetown, a man named Thomas Mulledy, he finds two purchasers Louisiana planters Henry Johnson, who had been a governor of Louisiana, and a neighbor of Johnsons named Jesse Beatty. And they, the deserts agree to sell 272 people to those two planters for \$115,000 in 1838, so it's about \$3 million in today's money, a lot more depending how you count. And I should add that in terms of archives, the contracts and the bills of sale between Mulledy and Johnson and Beattie are in the Maryland Province archives, which are on deposit at Georgetown University. And those are really those documents are really the backbone of the archival materials that document this history.

But are you really asked about my my mental image of that moment of sale. And we actually have some documents that give us a glimpse at what that must have been like particularly for the enslaved people in the plantations. There is one document there's a letter from a Jesuit priest at one of the one of the plantations, who gives a very vivid description of speaking with some of the people at Newtown plantation

and being there when they were informed they were going to be sold and he writes up their anguish and despair at the thought of being sold 1000 miles away to Louisiana. And he writes about one, one woman in particular, who kind of implores him, you know what, what is going to become of us. And all he can really do is to tell her to trust in God. These are very devout people are Catholics. So it's an extremely poignant and powerful moment in this long history of Jesuit slaveholding that's intimately connected to the history of Georgetown.

LM 7:50

Adam, before we come back to that moment, from the student, or, or faculty point of view, can you just say a little bit more about the kinds of work that these enslaved people would have done? Do the documents specify that, and how similar was the kinds of work that enslaved people did on the Georgetown plantations as compared to other universities who might have also owned slaves.

AR 8:17

So the documents are actually extremely rich. Concerning the plantations in Maryland, the collection that speaks to this best is called the Maryland province archives. And these are the archives of the Maryland Jesuits. And that's a series of dozens and dozens of boxes across decades and decades, only some of which has to do with slavery and slave holding. But it does document some of the operations of those plantations from the 18th century through the mid 19th century. And so we see in account books and Ledger's in scraps of receipts. In correspondence among Jesuit priests, you do get these, these very small windows, these apertures, into the experience of the enslaved community on these plantations. They were basically tobacco and mixed farming plantations, the tobacco economy in the Chesapeake was undergoing a transition in the late 18th and 19th centuries, they had been tobacco plantations, a lot of them had shifted into mixed economies with a focus on wheat farming. And the enslaved communities, men, women and children did a lot of different things. Some of it was agricultural labor, but some of it is craft work, and artisanal. So there are records for instance of some of the enslaved men on these plantations being blacksmiths, and carpenters, so doing highly skilled kinds of work, there's less documentation of what about the women were but what the women did, they also would have been agricultural workers. But mixed in with that would have been things like making clothes, cooking, and other kinds of domestic work. And what those folks did on those plantations is very similar to what enslaved people did on tobacco farms and plantations across the Chesapeake in the 18th and 19th centuries. So there again, you can think of these Maryland plantations as really a microcosm of the larger history of American slavery. And when we take one step back even further and think about the Maryland Jesuit plantations in relation to the plantations connected to other colleges and schools across what becomes the United States, we see the same kind of diversity that we see in American slavery, more generally, colleges in the Chesapeake, like William and

Mary, and Georgetown are connected to tobacco plantations, colleges in the deep south are connected more to cotton plantations. And the same kinds of diversity of work and labor experiences are featured on those plantations as in American slavery more generally. So one of the lessons here is that the experience of enslaved people on these farms and plantations was very varied. And it also contrasted with the work that enslaved people did on the college campuses themselves, which is much more likely to be various forms of domestic service than agricultural work. So there's another kind of distinction that we could draw.

LM

So if you had been a student on campus, or a faculty member at Georgetown in 1838, how aware would you have been of the sale and of the presence of slavery more generally on campus?

AR

That's a that's a difficult question to answer because we haven't facilities. From the student perspective, we really don't have that many diaries, letters and memos from students from the mid to late 1830s. And I really haven't come across anything from students that has registered any kind of awareness of the sale whatsoever. The Jesuit priests, of course, around campus are highly aware of it. They've been debating it for 20 years. Some of them were themselves involved in the sale in orchestrating it, in some cases opposing it. So their views are pretty well known. But I think it's important to understand that there's slavery on the on the Jesuit plantations, which were miles and miles away from Georgetown. But there was also there were also enslaved people on campus and students brought family servants and enslaved people to campus and hire them out to the university or use them to attend to their own needs and desires. The university itself hired and enslaved people from its neighbors, and employed them in the wash house in the infirmary and doing odd jobs around campus. And there seems to have been a simultaneous sale of enslaved people who are actually on campus to a local purchaser in Washington, DC. But that sale is much more difficult to track. And we're still combing through archives to see if we can figure out anything about that other sale. But I think the final thing I'll say about this is that we know that the 1838 sale did not end, the Maryland Jesuits involvement in slavery, there remained some enslaved people on the plantations in Maryland. And they're continued to be enslaved people working on campus all the way up through DC emancipation in April of 1862. Just smaller numbers.

TJ 13:23

Wow. Interesting. I have to be honest, the distinction between the plantations and the campus is actually not something that occurred to me. So that's really, that's definitely an important note. So I've, I've looked at some early Historical Society, publications about the sale about the Jesuits and enslavement. And so I've seen sources that

have described the sale going back to at least the late 19th century, early 20th century. And I guess before then, people it was within the lifespans of people who were living in that area. But I want to ask you about the memory of this event. You've you've written that this was not a secret, per se. And I'd love to hear a little bit more about that process. Was it always known has it been rediscovered every generation what is the historiographical story of, of the memory and discovery and rediscovery of these events?

AR

The this memory, the history and memory of the 1838 sale is an incredible story in itself. I think there have always been small communities of people who were aware of the sale. It was never a secret. It was never hidden. But at the same time, it's been rediscovered at different points, we can go way back to kind of the first point in which the memory of the sale reappears in the Jesuit archives, and that's actually in 1848 10 years after the sale when a Jesuit priest who was stationed in Cincinnati actually visited the plantations in Louisiana, and wrote two letters back to the Maryland Jesuits basically complaining that the enslaved people had been neglected. And that the promise of the Jesuits had made to them that they would be able to continue to practice their Catholicism, had been broken. So that's kind of the first time in the archival record that the sale is remembered. Besides the fact that for the next 25 years after the sale, that dozens kept trying to collect on the money that they were owed, for the sale, so there's an archival trace of that as well. Then, in the in the late 19th, and early 20th century, there's a Jesuit priest named Joseph Zwingli, who was kind of an amateur historian of the Maryland plantations, and he actually wrote a series of articles for a Jesuit publication called the Woodstock Letters, which talked a lot about the enslaved communities on the plantations, and the history of the sale itself. So in the early 20th century, the Jesuits were writing about it. And then if we fast forward another couple generations, when my predecessor at Georgetown Emmett Curran, who had been a Jesuit, wrote the Bicentennial history of the university, which came out in the late 1980s, he also wrote about the university and the Jesuits connections to slavery and the impact of the 1830 sale on the college. So anybody who read it, basically, the quasi official history of the university in the late 20th century would have been aware of it. Then again, in the 1990s, the American Studies Program at Georgetown actually had a whole curriculum around this history, and made a pioneering effort to digitize some of the most important archival material and put it on the web. So there was a community of folks around American Studies at Georgetown who are well aware of all of this history. But here again, it was a relatively small cohort of people. And when the working group for slavery, memory and reconciliation started its work in 2015, it became clear to us that most people in and around Georgetown still had no idea about any of this. And that's why one of the most important things that the working group decided to do was to commit ourselves to telling the

story in some new ways, so we could reach broader circles of people. That's one side of the history of the memory of the sale. But the other side of the history of the memory of the sale is the memory of the GU272 community itself and their descendants. And it's, it's obvious. I mean, when you think about it, that the GU272, the enslaved community itself had memories of the sale that they maintained through the late 19th century. But what also seems to be the case is that across generations, that memory was lost, it was not transmitted for the most part across generations. So that in the 21st century, when the Georgetown Memory Project, which is an independent nonprofit organization, started by a Georgetown alumnus, Richard Cellini, when the Georgetown memory project started to contact descendants of the GU272, to connect them to this history, for the most part, none of the living descendants really had any knowledge that this was part of their family histories. So on that side, the memory had been lost as well and is being rediscovered.

TJ 18:26

So it sounds like there's two ways to understand this. On one hand, there is a public history story here that a history that was being published in historical journals, was known to specialists but had not reached a larger mainstream audience, but then sort of new methods both by you and by and by the Memory Project allowed a new communities to be aware of it. And of course, with the Georgetown story, it seems to me it is the descendant community that makes it truly exceptional. On the other hand, you might argue that this was a store a history that was sort of waiting to find this moment to really kind of explode into relevance. But I guess if that were the case, you might have expected it to happen in the 60s, or the 70s, or the 90s. But do you have any thoughts about why it was this moment when it really seems and this might just be the perspective of someone who was not on campus, but it really seemed that this was the moment when students and activists were ready to really engage these facts that had been available to them, but for some reason, had not sparked the energy that we saw in the last few years at Georgetown?

AR

Yeah, it's a wonderful question. And something I think we've all been wrestling with, why are all of these histories really coming into the spotlight? Now, in the last five years, in the last 10 years, maybe the last 15 years, some of these inquiries go back, at least to Brown University's study of its of its ties to slavery under Ruth Simmons back in 2004 2005. But it still took another at least another decade for other universities to jump on the bandwagon of self study. I think there are a history of graphical reasons for that, in part, Craig Steven Wilder's book *Ebony and Ivy* was published in 2013. And that really was a landmark study of the relationship between particularly northern colleges and universities and slavery. And that signaled a kind of historiographical, critical mass almost, for this kind of study. I mean, Professor Wilder really showed everybody that the

archival material was there for the taking, if anybody wanted to pursue it. And then of course, there's the broader political context, the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, the massacre at Mother Emanuel church in Charleston, the rise of Black Lives Matter, and rejuvenation of a civil rights movement around those kinds of issues. That raised questions of history in a new way. And I certainly think the Working Group on Slavery, Memory and Reconciliation at Georgetown, very much was conducted in the light of those public events and that political context. And I would add one other thing, which is the technical possibilities for doing this history, thanks, in part to digitization, and the new tools for genealogical research like ancestry.com, it has become much much easier to trace African American family history is back to the era of slavery than it ever was in the 20th century. And I think some of the stuff that the Georgetown memory project did in combination with Judy Riffle of Louisiana genealogist simply would not have been, really would not have been feasible to do a generation earlier.

LM

So I want to turn now more explicitly to the archives and and you've been talking a little bit about the role that archives play in establishing paper trails. And I guess the shared role of universities and other groups that use these public archives play in telling, telling stories about, about history and about the paths that social justice can take today. And in looking at your profile on the Georgetown history department, that part of your job pretty explicitly is to be a steward of this archive, and make this archive, a working archive. And you've talked a little bit about how the 1990s movement to digitize materials sounds like a turning point, both in making the archive accessible to scholars, but also to to journalists, to amateur historians. But I guess I'm still curious if there were any new aspects of the archive that were discovered. Were there any new caches of documents that were brought to light? Or was the technology of digitizing and making archives searchable, was that a tool in in unearthing some sort of newly rich and immediate documents that helped make this story, as Thai has said, a publicly explosive one?

AR 23:36

Let me start by just going back to the digitization project of the American Studies program in the 1990s. One thing that I think that is really important about that effort was that a woman named Patricia Bayonne-Johnson, who herself is a genealogist out in the Pacific Northwest, who was researching her family, her own family history, and connected to Judy Riffle a genealogist in Louisiana, she was actually the first person to use the documents that have been digitized in the desert plantation project to trace her own family history back to what we now call today, the GU272. And I think that is really important to understand that one of the most crucial audiences for the digitization of these documents are the descendants themselves who are conducting their own genealogical research into their family histories. And a lot

of what is really new come out of the descendent community making use of these materials for themselves. That's one thing. The second thing is that a lot of us at Georgetown who teach us history had actually used the material from the desert plantation project in our classes, and things like that. Shortly before the working group got going in 2015, the Jesuit plantation project kind of disappeared from the Georgetown website, thanks to upgrades in the infrastructure of the university's web architecture, which is a good reminder that digitization is not the same thing as preservation. And things that you put online can disappear just as readily as from anywhere else. But when we started the Georgetown slavery archive, as a kind of Jesuit plantation project, 2.0, you know, there are some new tools at our disposal that we could use to really improve the digitization and presentation of that archival material. So we're using a platform called omeka, for instance, which is really designed to curate digitized material. So that's, that's been great. And it was fairly easy to learn and and to use. But as we got deeper into the material, we realized that we couldn't just reproduce what the Jesuit plantation project had digitized, because there was so much more in the archives and in different kinds of archives, beyond just the 1838, sale, and some of the other material that the Jesuit plantation project had digitized. So for instance, one at one thing that we've done that I think is new, is, in addition to the Maryland province archives, which is the Jesuit material, we've also paid close attention to the University Archives, which is actually a totally separate collection, and quite massive, and includes things like the financial ledgers that record the payments from students to the university, and the transactions of the university itself conducted. And that's where you find a lot of the dealing in enslaved people at the university. And that's really, that's really not an archive that people had examined closely before. So that is an example of how the discovery of new archival materials really does kind of change the story. Thai mentioned earlier that he hadn't fully grasped the distinction between slavery on the plantations operated by the Jesuits and slavery on the campus. And it's really only by looking closely at the University Archives, that the full picture of slavery on campus becomes clear.

And if I could add one more thing, we also have come to understand the importance of archives beyond the university and beyond Georgetown all together that connect to the story. So for instance, the Georgetown library has digitized the records of Holy Trinity Parish, a Catholic Church, adjacent to campus. And those records contain birth, baptismal and, and burial records of enslaved people who worked at Georgetown. And that's, again opened up new vistas onto slavery in the Georgetown community and neighborhood. And then there are things like the slave trade records at the National Archives, and court records in Louisiana material at the Maryland State Archives. So there's just a far flung constellation of archives that have to be pulled together to tell the full story of this very rich history. And it's a it's a big job.

TJ

Yeah, I would say, it's one of the great kind of archival detective stories of recent years, you know, talking to the people involved in the research over the years, just the excitement in the drama of chasing these papers, as you say, to all these different repositories, I mean, I, you know, local, like, community archives and historical societies and county records and, and just the vast amount of research that's been done in places that are both in the center of history and also kind of out of the way. It's just, it really is an inspirational effort. And, you know, it's great to, to think of the excitement and power of that type of research. I'm not sure how much of that work you've been able to do. I don't know if your schedule allows you to actually participate in that. But is there a moment or two that you've experienced in the in the archives? Or maybe that like a student has described for you, where you have kind of been able to experience the power of of those moments of discovery? Is there anything that that you remember, in your own time research for this project that stands out for you?

AR 29:27

I have done some original archival research on this project, in the Booth Family Center for special collections, but a lot of the research has been done by other people. It was done by members of the American Studies program a generation ago. It's done by some of our students, undergraduates and graduate students here at Georgetown, we have a PhD candidate, Elsa Mendoza. Mendoza was actually writing her dissertation right now about Georgetown college and slavery. And she's really turned up a lot of fascinating stuff in the University Archives that document people that we just really, you know, really didn't know, existed before.

One of the archival discoveries that I think is, was moving to me, it's actually not from the University Archives. It's some another repository. But I found I found out that the founders of the Georgetown medical school, were slave owners. And in one case, at least one case, one of the founders had submitted a compensation claim for the people he owned to the federal government or as part of DC emancipation in 1862. And it was really striking, first of all, to learn that the founders of the medical school had been slave owners. It was quite moving, to learn the names of the people that they had enslaved. And then it was really provoking to think that it was the owners who got compensation for the loss of their human property in 1862, rather than the newly freed people getting any kind of compensation for their years of unrequited toil. So that that was a discovery that hit me quite squarely in the face.

The other archival moment that I think about all the time, and I don't think I discovered this, and I can't remember who should get the credit. But members of the GU272 community in Louisiana after emancipation, some of them were able to buy property and set up for

themselves. And in the late 19th century a group of them actually donated land, to the Catholic Church in Louisiana, to raise funds for a Catholic school for black children in their neighborhood. And that was also just a kind of devastating, archival discovery for me. It told a whole story about that community's struggled to make something of them of themselves in emancipation, the persistence of their Catholic faith and their commitment to educating their children. And it's just an incredibly powerful document. And then finally, I will say that for myself personally, some of the most stirring experiences for me, have just been sitting in the booth Family Center for Special Collections with members of the descendant community as we look through the archival material together, that contains the names of their ancestors in baptismal registers and bills of sale, and just hearing from them their reactions to that material, and then hearing the stories that they have about their family histories. While sitting in the archives, looking at these old documents, it's really, it's really very, very moving for me, because, you know, you get the sense that this history matters so much to them. So I'm happy to have a chance to have given something back to them from the archives.

LM

It's remarkable, the detailed traces on the archive that connect Georgetown, through time to the descendants in Louisiana throughout the 19th century, and then up to today, when descendants are rediscovering their family history through using the archives. But we've been interested in how the archive can be and is being used to document a case for reparations flowing from the institution, to the descendants. And here, you've just described evidence in the archive showing a descendant donating land back to the Catholic Church.

AR

It's an incredibly incredible, incredible, it's an incredible story. I mean, it's like, I don't even know what to say about it. It's such a powerful act that they did in the late 19th century. And it speaks to so many of the aspirations of of emancipated people in the late 19th century.

LM

Well, in our in our final moments, I think we want to, we want to draw this this story to the present again. So the student movement to vote on reparations was international news. And I think I want to just start by asking how much do you think it was driven by the existence of the archive and the efforts to make these archival documents the sort of concrete paper trail of George town's long and close history with slavery much more visible on campus and and using it as documentary evidence to to move forward this reparations movement?

AR 35:20

I think the advocacy team the due to some students for GU272 advocacy team was certainly well aware of the archival materials, some of them

had worked on and with the archival materials, and they often invoked the historical record in very concrete ways and very palpable ways to make their case for reparations. I think some of them found some inspiration in the slavery archive. But I wouldn't want to overstate the importance of the archival materials to the student debate over reparations. I think it was kind of a necessary backdrop for a lot of people. But I would hesitate to say that this deep familiarity with the archival record is what motivated people to vote one way or another on the referendum. But I do think that the archival project was part of a much broader raising of consciousness around campus about Georgetown's history of slavery. And so it's, you know, it's one element among many. But even now, you know, this, I guess, two years after the referendum, and you know, new classes of students have come in, there's still a lot of students who don't know very much at all about Georgetown's history of slavery, or if they know something about it certainly don't know about it in a very deep way that's rooted in a familiarity with the archival record. But there is a huge interest among students on campus and an eagerness to know more. So this semester, I'm teaching a class history oh nine "Facing Georgetown's History," and there's 100 students in that class. I've never taught a bigger class than this. There was so much demand for the class that we had to add two more sections to the class. And there's still a waitlist. So I think I on Georgetown campus and a lot of other campuses, students really want to know the history. They want to know how to research the history for themselves. And when they are confronted with archival material that documents, the school's histories of slavery, and post emancipation, racism, they are, in many cases really shocked and moved to some kind of action. And it's one thing to hear generally, that your school has a history of slavery, it's another thing to, to read a runaway ad, an advertisement for a man, an enslaved man, who was working at Georgetown, and who tried to escape. And to see the description of him in that advertisement. I mean, this hits you in a different kind of way.

TJ

So, I was wondering about this very question, because I spoke to people who were at Brown when when they launched their research initiative, and, and even there, there was a sense a few years on, there was faculty turnover, student turnover, and that moment, ended up feeling a little bit fleeting, perhaps. So it's exciting to hear that that Georgetown, there is still a lot of interest in this. You know, I haven't heard an update recently, but has in fact, the the initiative gone into effect our student funds being collected, is there a reparations fund that's being enacted? And so is there an ongoing kind of reparations process that's happening? I guess last time, I heard, there was still a question of the trustees and the students had voted, but there were still some, some hurdles. But is that still is it in fact, in in play right now?

AR 39:21

So for the for listeners who might not again be familiar with everything that's going on at Georgetown, what happened was two years ago, students through their their student government association voted quite overwhelmingly, as a matter of fact, to institute an activity fee of \$27.20 a semester to fund to subsidize a reconciliation fund that would support programs that would benefit the descendant community. The university through its board of trustees did not approve of that, of establishing that activity fee. The university has said that it will create an equivalent reconciliation fund for programs that will benefit the descendant community, but it will not raise that money through a student activity fee. Things were just getting going in trying to implement that fund, and to conceive of the kinds of programs that could benefit the descendant community in collaboration with the descendant community around this time last year, and then COVID hit. And we've all just been struggling to stay afloat, tick, just even just to keep our classes going over the last year, but there are committees formed on campus to try to shepherd those kinds of collaborations with the descendant community and move them forward. But it's but it is a struggle, and the aspirations of the students who wanted an activity fee have not been met. So some students are discouraged and disappointed by that. And at the same time, there are efforts at reconciliation and certain forms of repair that continued to go forward. So I'll put it that way. Like, like with everything in this in this initiative, it's been kind of long, kind of slow, and kind of murky process. But one thing that's been constant, I think, is the importance of knowing your history. And the archives have been essential to that.

TJ

One thing that was so striking about just what a huge deal that was, was in 2016, it wasn't maybe it was a little bit later than that, but just strikes me that it was it was such a small scale. On the one hand, such a small scale step towards the overall goal of reparations. And yet, it was significant, maybe mostly significant because there are so few successful examples. And it did it just it got worldwide attention despite being at the end of the day, you know, a student vote on a single campus. And so it had this incredibly powerful symbolic value, and it's I guess, it's not surprising to hear that. It's the The the success of it is, is still ongoing and that more work needs to be done.

AR 42:24

Yeah. And I would add, just in addition to something you said earlier about these moments being kind of fleeting. One thing that has really sustained the slavery, memory and reconciliation effort at Georgetown over the last five years, is persistent student activism and pressure, as well as student interest, you know, just students taking classes, and working through this history in different ways, across the curriculum and outside the curriculum and their own organization. And as long as I really believe as long as students stay interested in

this history, it's not going to go away. But as soon as lose interest, then yes, the moment will be fleeting.

Li Moe

You've described a movement that has had mixed results. It is a movement on one campus that was nevertheless a magnet for national interest. But how much of it do you think can be replicated elsewhere? What elements do you think we could pull from the movement for reparations at Georgetown, that could be replicated in broader campaigns?

AR

I think that one of the things that the students at Georgetown did successfully, was really make it personal, and local, and about their own school and their own community. And part of that is tapping into the specific history of Georgetown and the Maryland Jesuits. And connecting that to Georgetown's ongoing identity as a Jesuit and Catholic School, which I think allows the students to frame the issue of reconciliation and reparations in both a moral and a religious language that can break through some of those conventional partisan and ideological barriers. So they can say like, this is the you know, this is not about national politics, this is about our own history. On top of that, you know, Georgetown has this unusual situation where there is a large and growing community of Descendants of people who were owned by the Jesuits were connected to Georgetown. And that, again, makes it a deeply personal kind of wrestling with history. It's not abstract at Georgetown, as it might be for some students, students at other universities. But I think also you have to face it, I know Georgetown is a pretty liberal community and in a pretty liberal environment. And I think of the same debate is conducted at the University of Mississippi, it's going to look quite different. So we have to be realistic about the utility of Georgetown as a model for other universities and other communities that are that are confronting very difficult histories.

TJ

I mean, the way it does seem to me to be a mile, and you have a place where there was a small African American student population. And you had over the course of the conversations and the mobilizing, you got to a place where you had more than 60% of students voting for this initiative. And so that meant mostly whites, you know, the majority of white students were eventually turned around to it. So I take your point about the sort of initial liberalism of the campus. But that is, I think, a microcosm of what would need to happen for a sort of national reparations bill, for instance, to to succeed, you would have to find a way to mobilize a majority of white opinion to support it. And my sense from Georgetown is actually was this process of conversations and demonstrations and reading groups and, you know, late night parlays that have made it happen. So it's, it's the process, as well as the destination.

AR

Yeah, kind of a respectful deliberation, insofar as that's possible. You can think that can happen at a college campus. If it can't happen on a college campus, it can't happen anywhere.

LM

Right, well, there's so much shared Goodman among students who are living together and have chosen to be there. And I think what I was thinking about was this, this line about actually Biden in which suddenly everything that Biden says, even if it's cribbed from AOC, suddenly sounds moderate. And so once you get, you know, like a campus like Georgetown, which is no Bennington, you know, it's no Antioch to vote about reparations, then you shifted the conversation hugely.

AR

Definitely. Yeah. And I think I'm out Too often I'm up. I'm optimistic, not so much about reparations, but I'm optimistic about the students. connections to history, you know, I'm not. For me, what's really remarkable is that this class, I'm teaching this semester, like there was huge demand for it, you know? And it's not just because I'm, you know, it's not because I'm that great of a teacher is because the students really want to know. And I think that's, that is this. For me, that's the seed of optimism. That's where the optimism comes from, that that eagerness to know their history.

TJ

Well, Professor Rothman, thank you so much for taking time to speak with us today. This was fascinating, and we really appreciate your insights.

AR 48:05

Oh, my pleasure. Thank you for the conversation.

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