



## What We Are Learning About Learning, S2E3

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KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI

Today we talk with Professor Adam Rothman, an expert in the history of the United States, from the revolution to the Civil War, and in the history of slavery and abolition in the Atlantic world. Here at Georgetown, he teaches courses in Atlantic history, 19th century US history, and the history of slavery. He's also the author of four books and was a member of Georgetown's working group on slavery memory and reconciliation and the principal curator of the Georgetown Slavery Archive, a repository of materials relating to the Maryland Jesuits, Georgetown University and slavery. Among the many courses he teaches, one is called Facing Georgetown's History. I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

JOE KING

And I'm Joe King. You're listening to What We Are Learning About Learning, a podcast about higher ed teaching and learning, created and produced by the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship at Georgetown University. In this episode, Adam speaks with Molly Chehak about the faculty role in university-wide efforts to understand, document, contend with, teach and atone for Georgetown's slaveholding past.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI

These efforts have been a long time coming and dovetail with Adam's area of expertise. Though of course they are far bigger than any one scholar or any one conversation. This episode is our second in a series of episodes we're having on anti-racist teaching, and one in which we are specifically contending with Georgetown's history of slavery.

JOE KING

So here's our conversation with Adam. We hope the discussions will inform anti-racist pedagogy and practice across the university and beyond.

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MOLLY CHEHAK

Adam, what would you say has happened in recent years that has changed our understanding of the history of slavery at Georgetown?

ADAM ROTHMAN



A lot. So I should say at the beginning that Georgetown's history of slavery was never a secret. Scholars have been publishing about it for decades. If you read the bicentennial history of the university, which was written by my predecessor, Emma Curran, and came out in the early 90s, there was a lot about Georgetown and slavery in that book.

The American Studies program had a whole curriculum around Georgetown's history of slavery in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. But other than the fairly small cohort of people who either read that multi-volume bicentennial history of the university or who participated in the American Studies program, I don't think there was a great deal of knowledge across the university about our history. So one thing that's happened is that a lot more people have learned at least some of the details about Georgetown's historical relationship to slavery.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI

This increase in awareness, both within and beyond Georgetown, about the university's history with slavery was spurred by a variety of events. In 2015, protests about racial injustice on college campuses inspired a range of prominent universities in the US to begin speaking more publicly about their histories. Georgetown students were part of this movement, including then graduate student Matthew Quallen, whose series in The Hoya student newspaper galvanized attention and activism on campus.

Externally, one part of Georgetown's institutional story in particular caught the attention of the New York Times and NPR's Planet Money, both of which produced excellent reporting that we'll include in the show notes. This was the story of the Maryland Jesuits who sold the 272 enslaved African people they owned and used part of the proceeds of the sale to pay off the debts of the college.

ADAM ROTHMAN

The second thing that's happened is that we've learned more about Georgetown's historical relationship to slavery. We have learned more about how deep it goes, how broad it is, how important the story is, and how much it's a microcosm of the whole history of American slavery. One thing I'll say is that for a long time the story of Georgetown's relationship to slavery was really a story about Georgetown's connections to the Maryland plantations that were operated by the Jesuits.

And that's a huge story and an important story. Largely due to the work of Elsa Barraza Mendoza, who was a PhD student here at Georgetown who wrote her dissertation on the topic, we've actually learned a lot more about the role of slavery on Georgetown's campus. The use of slave labor, the fact that the campus was a place where enslaved people lived, worked, and died.

And then, finally, we've learned a lot more about the people who were held in bondage by the Maryland Jesuits who are connected to Georgetown. And a great deal about what happened to them after this infamous mass sale in 1838. And we've met a lot of their descendants who are alive today.



MOLLY CHEHAK

Could you tell us a little bit about what it's been like unearthing the history and becoming so involved with the descendants and helping them make connections?

ADAM ROTHMAN

Intense and very meaningful. Nothing in my graduate training or previous experience as an academic historian really prepared me for the kinds of relationships that have emerged out of this process of reflection. I wrote a couple of books about the history of slavery, and they were fine, I think they're good books.

But nothing I've ever done as a historian seems to have mattered as much to other people as the work that we all have been doing around Georgetown's own history of slavery. Just touches a lot of people in a very visceral way. It's caught on in kind of a broader popular imagination thanks to the work of a lot of people, including the Georgetown memory project and reporting of Rachel Swarns of the New York Times.

So I've just been part of a much larger process of the unfolding of a story that just really captures the whole history of American slavery within it. So it's a big story, but it's also a very personal story to a lot of people. It's about people's ancestors and their families. And it just has a kind of dimension that is sometimes missing from our academic scholarship. And so I've gotten to know people whose lives are deeply touched by this history.

I've had the opportunity to sit with them in our archives or the Booth Family Center for Special Collections as they work through these old ledgers and baptismal records, bills of sale with the names of their ancestors on them. And I see how much it means to them. For me it adds to the sense of responsibility and obligation to learn more about those histories and to teach them properly to folks around Georgetown.

MOLLY CHEHAK

How has bringing Georgetown's history into your teaching changed your teaching?

ADAM ROTHMAN

Before 2015 I actually taught some about Georgetown's history of slavery. I would incorporate it into my class on the history of American slavery or Atlantic history, and I still do that. But now I have this Facing Georgetown's History class, which is really dedicated to teaching this history, putting it in a broader historical context so that people can understand it, and linking it to things that are going on in the present. But also my graduate teaching-- I now teach a course called Thinking About Archives which is about archival theory and practice. And that course actually comes directly out of my experience working with



the archives that connect to slavery here at Georgetown, both the college archives and the Archives of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus.

MOLLY CHEHAK

I'd love to hear more about what kinds of assignments you give to students to engage with this history and connect the past and present?

ADAM ROTHMAN

First thing that we do in the class is go back to the original sources. We read what the archives tell us. What is in the archives? What does it document about the institution of slavery at Georgetown, the experience of enslaved people at Georgetown? Just what's there, and what does it tell us about our history?

So for example-- and this is a document I almost always begin with. There's an advertisement for a runaway slave named Isaac in 1814 who ran away from Georgetown. He worked here in Georgetown in bondage, and he ran away to try to seek his freedom. So we have that advertisement and some other information about him.

And just having students look at that and to understand that slavery is not something that happened somewhere else far away but something that happened right here at our doorstep, I think changes students relationship to the subject. It just makes it more urgent, more immediate, and more personal. Georgetown's history is a microcosm of the whole history of American slavery.

So it opens up broader questions about slavery and American history more generally. Georgetown was not the only school, of course, that was involved with slavery one way or another. So we try to think about how the experience of Georgetown compares to others. So we read scholarship. We also connect it to questions of memory and reconciliation. How is this history remembered and commemorated on campus and across America?

That, of course, gets us into questions about statues, and who deserves a place in our landscape of memory. We get to questions of reconciliation and reparation. Or what does it mean, now that we know this history, what do we do about it? So we go through lots of different ways of thinking about the relationship between the past and the present.

And part of that means talking to descendants of the GU272. Talking to the people whose families were most impacted by this history, and getting their perspective on what the history means to them and what they think reconciliation and reparation means.

MOLLY CHEHAK



The overarching theme of our podcast is what we're learning about learning. So we'd love to hear more about what you've learned about how your students learn as you transition more into teaching the history of slavery at Georgetown.

ADAM ROTHMAN

Less is sometimes more. The way historians think about history is not always appealing to the way students think about history. We can get lost in the details too often, and it can be alienating to students. For instance, writing a research paper is not the best way for students to feel a connection to the material. Some students just don't think that way. So an art project can be a much more meaningful learning experience for a student than writing a book review. Trying to find assignments that capture the student's imagination rather than imposing on them the standards of my particular discipline.

So we have students do podcasts. We have students do videos. Some students do art. I had a student who did a dance performance as a kind of response to the archives. Music, a lot of digital projects, story maps, timelines, and things like that. And the main thing is I want students to produce knowledge, not just consume it. I want students to generate ways of thinking about history that can reach the campus community and broader public.

JOE KING

You can see one example of this type of public student artwork by visiting our show notes. In this example, Joy Kang depicts a landmark Georgetown building with the names of the 272 enslaved Africans who were sold to keep the university solvent.

MOLLY CHEHAK

What are your observations about how students have responded to engaging with the history of slavery in the classroom setting?

ADAM ROTHMAN

First of all, I should say that students have been really important for driving the slavery memory and reconciliation initiative at Georgetown. It was a student journalist who wrote a series of articles in *The Hoya* the year before the working group was founded that put this history back on the radar of the university community, especially the students. Students were part of the working group. In 2015, 2016, students protested during that year in ways that really highlighted that this history meant a lot to them. In 2019, the GU272 Referendum really captured the imagination of the students. They debated it for weeks in a very thoughtful way. The question of reparations--

JOE KING

As Rothman notes, interest has been ongoing, and students learning about this history have themselves continued to mobilize the interests of others.



ADAM ROTHMAN

The students who learn about this stuff in class then tell their roommates and friends and classmates, and they bring this knowledge into other classes. So I think it continues to build. It hasn't faded away. I taught my Facing Georgetown's History class as an American Studies seminar for four years to a good response among American Studies students.

It meant a lot to have it in the American Studies curriculum. And those students really helped me shape the curriculum. And they kept telling me, more students need to be able to take this class, more students need to be exposed to this history. So that was really-- the impetus to move from a seminar to a big lecture came from the students.

MOLLY CHEHAK

You said earlier that Georgetown slaveholding history is in a way a microcosm of American slavery. I'm wondering how else that idea helps to get at some foundational concepts of race in American history and in America now.

ADAM ROTHMAN

Partly it's that understanding the history of the Maryland Jesuits and the Jesuit plantations is a way into the co-evolution of the institution of slavery and the concept of race in American history. The consolidation of justifications of slavery around concepts of race that Black people are fit to be slaves. There's lots of ways of showing how that process came to be through the case of Georgetown.

And then the idea that slavery is in some ways at the foundation of American society and its institutions. Georgetown is a great example of that. A school founded by a Catholic slaveholding elite in which slave labor-- The whole idea was that slave labor would help to subsidize the education of free white boys and men. You can't get more clarity than that about the material interests and identities that slavery serves. Then there's also the complexity of the experience of enslaved people themselves. The tension between the brutality and victimization they endured, and the lives that they built for themselves, the families they created, the religious beliefs that they embraced, the desire for freedom that they exhibited. So that actually is kind of an inspiring story in some respects.

And talking to members of the descendant community, it becomes even more inspiring to see how they've persisted, in some cases even thrived, over the years, despite the institutions of racism that they've confronted. And then the final thing I'll say is that Georgetown also gives us material to understand how racism outlasts slavery and persists through in the 19th and 20th centuries.

JOE KING

In fact, professor Rothman reminds us that one of Georgetown's storied figures, Patrick Healy, had a unique relationship to enslavement.



ADAM ROTHMAN

The ironic example is Patrick Healy, celebrated figure in Georgetown's history. Healy Hall is named after Patrick Healy. And there are informational plaques about his life in Healy Hall. But still I think most students, and probably a lot of other people around Georgetown's campus, really have no idea who he was or why he's celebrated at Georgetown.

But this is a man who was born into slavery. His mother was an enslaved woman. His father was an Irish immigrant cotton planter in Georgia. And he-- I won't tell the whole story here, but he rises through the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the Jesuit order to become President of Georgetown. And today he's celebrated and commemorated and remembered as the first Black president of a major American university. But he passed for white. And he became president at a time when Georgetown was white only. It would be another 80 years before any Black students were admitted to Georgetown. So a figure like Healy can really help us understand the persistence of racism and white supremacy after slavery at a place like Georgetown. And the long struggle-- just to how long the struggle towards inclusion and equality for African-Americans was at the university.

MOLLY CHEHAK

You talked about things being unmarked. For you what are the major questions that are still unanswered?

ADAM ROTHMAN

We're still learning about what happened to the GU272 and their descendants. The Georgetown Memory Project keeps doing its research on the family histories. We keep meeting more descendant families and learning more about their histories. And that really, the history of what happened to the GU272, has still yet to be fully written. There's so much work to do around communities, including the people who are left behind in Maryland.

That's still pretty enigmatic. We know that not everybody went to Louisiana, some stayed behind. And so the one issue, one big issue locally, is the relationship between the Maryland Jesuits slave community, and the people they were adjacent to, and the history of Black Catholicism in Washington, DC and in the Chesapeake. That's a big story that I think we're just scratching the surface of.

JOE KING

There's so much we are still learning about this history through the study of the archives and communication with the descendant community. And it's important that we recognize this as an ongoing process because it raises questions, not only of scholarship and pedagogy, but also of memorialization and reconciliation.

ADAM ROTHMAN



One thing we worry about is 10 years from now are we going to need another slavery memory and reconciliation working group to remind people of what everybody has just forgotten? So how do we institutionalize teaching about this history so that each new cohort of Georgetown students, staff, and faculty know about it? I think that's the big question that we face moving forward.

And some of it, a lot of it, is going to take place in the curriculum, like active teaching. But some of it has to take place through memorialization on campus. Some of it will take place through extracurricular or co-curricular activities like alternative spring breaks to Louisiana, students-- I've done a couple of lectures for the What's A Hoya group, new student orientation. So how are we going to put--

MOLLY CHEHAK

Embed it.

ADAM ROTHMAN

Yeah, how are we going to embed this knowledge just across Georgetown so that it doesn't fade again?

MOLLY CHEHAK

Are there other challenges that you faced in bringing this to a larger audience?

ADAM ROTHMAN

My inclination as a historian is always to treat the past on its own terms. That it has its own issues, its own complexities, and we need to respect that. And in some ways that distances the past from the present. I want there to be a sense of strangeness about the past, a sense of difference about the past.

I think that's part of the appeal of studying history. But that actually-- there's a tension between that view of history and a history that sees continuities and echoes of the past in the present. And the students usually will see more continuities, for instance, in racism. And I try to challenge them to see the way things change over time. Not necessarily get better but the way they change.

JOE KING

Adam thinks a lot about how to engage students in historical study while empowering them to come to their own conclusions about what's needed in our contemporary moment.

ADAM ROTHMAN

I'm just a steward of the historical information. I want to give the students the information that they need to make their own choices about what the proper forms of repair might take. So I've tried to remain kind of neutral in that conversation. That's one of the biggest sources of controversy when you teach this material.



So I've tried to take a position that allows the students to express themselves without any fear that I'm going to tell them that they're wrong or barking up the wrong tree or something like that. So maybe that's helped. Some students get frustrated. They think I should be an advocate. I should be out there on the front lines but that's simply not my role. My role is to teach the history.

MOLLY CHEHAK

Faculty who want to be anti-racist in their practice and broaden their syllabi and in general want to be anti-racist allies on campus. Why is it important for them to engage with this particular history?

ADAM ROTHMAN

I think it's important for everybody. Faculty who want to be anti-- it's even more important for faculty who don't want to be anti-racist to engage with this history because it's the history of our school and our campus. Assuming faculty are intellectual people, we should have a curiosity about institutions that we're part of. What is the history of this place, and how do I fit into it? And I think we should all be asking that question.

In terms of anti-racist pedagogy in practice, I certainly think that our own school has a history that is really useful to think with. All of the issues around race and racism that we deal with in the broader society in our classes, we can find examples of that right in our own backyard. And that can be difficult to confront, but why not if it's right here? I just think in terms of anti-racist pedagogy there are two-- to me there's two levels to it.

One, is just paying attention to the needs of students of color in our classes and just being attentive to their concerns. And then the other is teaching material that sheds light on racism and anti-racism today. And I just think Georgetown's own history gives us all of those things in a way that really speaks strongly to students today. So I think it should be part of our anti-racist pedagogy because you can't escape it. It kind of belongs to all of us.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI

We hope this conversation has shed light on both Georgetown slaveholding history, its effort to contend with that history, and how you might use the resources developed through that process in your course or classroom. As always, please consider sharing your ideas with us. We're also interested in your thoughts, questions, stories, and ideas for future episodes. You can find the directions for sending us a voice memo in our show notes or on our website.

JOE KING

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Thanks also to Milo Stout for creating original music for the podcast and Joy Kang for her original artwork. For more information about our podcast series and our guests, check out our show notes where you'll find links to previous episodes, information about how to share your thoughts and ideas with us, our website and blog, Joy Kang's artwork and other resources. Again, I'm Joe King.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI

And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. Thanks for listening.

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