Archives in Context

Season 6 Episode 3: Jesse R. Erickson

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SPEAKERS

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TRANSCRIPT

JoyEllen Williams 00:00
When it comes to management and preservation of cultural heritage and records, one size does not fit all. That's why the San Jose State University School of Information offers not just one but to 100% online master's degree programs that focus on archives and records management. Customize your studies in the master of Archives and Records Administration, or Master of Library and Information Science Program, visit I school that sjsu.edu.

Nicole Milano 00:45
From the Society of American Archivists, this is Archives in Context, a podcast highlighting archival literature and technologies and most importantly, the people behind them. Hello, everyone, and welcome to another episode of the Archives and Context Podcast. I'm Nicole Milano, and I'm here with co host, JoyEllen Williams.

JoyEllen Williams 01:12
Hello everyone!

Nicole Milano 01:13
Today we're excited to be speaking with Dr. Jesse Ryan Erickson, author of the Gentleman's Ghost: Patriarchal Eurocentric Legacies in Special Collections Design, published in 2020, in Mary Kandiuk's book Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation by Library Juice Press. The Gentleman's Ghost examines special collections reading rooms within the context of the history of libraries, which he states, quote, encompass an infrastructure that was founded upon hierarchical colonial and exclusionary modalities of power, and quote, welcome, Jesse.

Jesse Erickson 01:47
Hello, hello.

JoyEllen Williams 01:50

Thank you so much for joining us. For those of our listeners who may not know you, here's a little background. Jesse Ryan Erikson is the curator of printed books and bindings at the Morgan Library and Museum. He earned his bachelor's, master's of library and information science, and doctorate and Information Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles. Thanks, again for being here with us today. Jesse, let's start with how did you find your way into the profession?

Jesse Erickson 02:23

Oh, well, you know, thanks for asking. I mean, I recounted my origin story many times. Now. So it may be familiar to some of our listeners, but it's an interesting one. And, you know, I can probably fill the podcast with it with the details. So I'll try to, you know, be as brief as possible. But essentially, you know, I decided to be a rare book librarian. And as a as a young student, I was in community college at the time. And I was, you know, I'd studied dance before, and it didn't really work out wasn't the best fit. So, you know, I was in this place in my life where, you know, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do. And I realized that, you know, books were always a really important part of my life, and I spend a lot of my youth in the library. And so library stood out to me. And it just seemed like my calling, right. And as I was investigating, you know, how one becomes a librarian, I learned I had to go back to school and get a masters. And it was the same year that that the rare California rare books, school was opening up. And, and then this sent me back to my high school years where my mother and I would go to the Huntington Library a lot. My mother loved the gardens. And naturally, I fell in love with the library there. And it just occurred to me that, you know, the rare books, his whole world of rare books, that there was a path to pursue a career in which I can work in a place like the Huntington and this was, was really, really exciting prospect for me, so it lit a fire under me. And at that point, I became committed to that goal of pursuing that career and doing whatever it took to make it in that field. And, and the rest was really history. At that point, you know, it was a really strategic decision to you know, pursue every opportunity that was available to me, start studying, you know, what I need, what I need to know. And, you know, I'm very grateful for those who helped me up along the way. I had just tremendous mentors. From the time that I was a clerk in the central library of the Los Angeles Public Library, and throughout, you know, my internship at the Getty and, working at UCLA, just just numerous mentors along the way that that really kind of helped me along and I really couldn't have done it without them.

JoyEllen Williams 04:59

You've given It's an idea of the role that libraries have played in your life, even from a young age. So what aspect of your work has been most meaningful to you? And why?

Jesse Erickson 05:12

That's, I love that question. You know, I mean, obviously, I love the collections. But to me, like collections, there are means to an end, right? So I'm really, I'm less interested in simply developing a collection for say, like the purpose of building prestige, or something like that, you know, having artifacts, like shit on the shelves, just collecting dust. And I've done, you know, a backlog inventory. So I know that backlog issues are real human, some, sometimes we get these collections, and they just sit on the shelf. For years and years. It's getting better. But yeah, those issues are still there. But to me, I think what's most important, and what's meaningful is sort of the opportunity to expand the boundaries of, of how we define knowledge, how we understand knowledge, you

know, most importantly, I'm interested in how we can advance the production of knowledge. Right. So to me, it's all about knowledge and learning. And that's really been the most meaningful aspect of this work.

Nicole Milano 06:14

So justly, we want to turn now to the gentleman's ghost, the position piece opens with the sentence, quote, Special Collections reading rooms, inherited by research libraries across the western world were designed for white men, and quote, When did you start thinking critically about Special Collections reading rooms? And what prompted you to write the piece?

Jesse Erickson 06:35

Well, to be honest, I actually started this work. Back when I was doing my dissertation research, and my dissertation on, you know, the, kind of the ways that we can rethink how we look at black literacy practices, and specifically in the context of Special Collections, libraries, as research environments, you know, these questions really started to come up. And it made me think about, you know, the personal experiences that I had, going back, you know, to my time at the Huntington where, you know, I sort of was overcome by feelings of both are right, but then also sort of intimidated in these spaces. And then, you know, as a community college student, I started to, to begin doing bibliographical research, learning about what that you know, entailed in Special Collections, right. And one of the first libraries I visited was the Clark Library, which really got me thinking about these questions, because the way Madras Clark Library, which is a part of UCLA, it's, it lives in an area, which is, over time, become a black and brown community, essentially, right. And so there's this, there's this interesting juxtaposition of what the clerk is, and what it represents, and the community that lives in, I think there's been tremendous improvements in the relationship from two of the clerk to the surrounding community, over the, you know, the past decade or so. But for years and years and years, at least from, you know, folks that I've talked to that, you know, live around or in the area or, you know, knew something about, you know, the area, there was a lot of mystery surrounding the library itself, the people in the community didn't really know what it is. And so, you know, my own experience of visiting these spaces, and the intimidation that I felt in these spaces really kind of prompted me to think rethink these through these issues. You know, and, and it all goes back to your previous question about what's most meaningful to me, you know, I've always been really fascinated by the sort of epistemological dimensions of knowing, you know, especially now given that the concept of justifiable truth has been pretty much cast aside, and perhaps a rebel irrevocably so but you know, I talk a lot about the power of branding and marketing knowledge and, and in learning in a more attractive way, but I think we need to really kind of work through ways to break down the barriers between learning, right, and what it means to sort of be entertained. Right. And I get so much pleasure from from reading and consuming other content and having conversations and my daily interactions, and I think maybe we all do. So when I entered a space like the one you find in the William Andrews Clark Library, sort of all these questions that are popping up in my mind as, as it pertains to, you know, how do these spaces impact the way that we learn how do these spaces is sort of change the dimensions of how we internalize and acquire and engage with knowledge. Right. So it all kind of links back to each other.

JoyEllen Williams 10:15

For those who have not read the piece, how would you summarize which aspects of our spaces might impact the subjective experience of doing research?

Jesse Erickson 10:26

So yeah, I mean, I really think like literally every aspect of the interior, right? would sort of have an impact on the subjective experience of, of doing research. And I mean, everything from the color scheme, right, to the lighting to decisions around, you know, whether there's carpet or not, what does that carpet look like? Are there ornamental rugs, right? Paintings, especially that you see around you? Oftentimes, they're bust. Right. And it was, at least it was clear to me that there was a trend across numerous libraries that I was that I was visiting. And that trend was modeled off of this sort of idea of what a gentleman's study would look like. Right. And that seemed to be sort of the standard. Now, you know, there's a lot of variation there. But you see a lot of those, you see a lot of the aspects of that visual lexicon, come into play. And, you know, it's really a difficult thing to pinpoint. The various ways in which these design decisions will have an impact on the ways that we conduct our research, the research process, but even things like the business ending of the table, what kind of chairs you have, whether there's multiple chairs in the space, you know, when the tables are separated off, I mean, all these things can, can really have an effect on, you know, the potential for doing different kinds of research than what's typically expected in a special collections reading.

Nicole Milano 12:24

We interviewed, or we spoke with Dr. Ashley farmer a few seasons ago about many of these same topics, and how the paintings on the wall, the bus that are displayed in these reading rooms, how they impact really the welcomeness of a space for many researchers. So these are really, really important points that you write about. You also write at one point in the piece that, quote, institutional racism in particular functions through a profound cultural embeddedness. That has outlasted much of the intentionality of its human agency and, quote, you also state that the vestiges of the past must be confronted, what actions do you hope will result from the position piece?

Jesse Erickson 13:05

I mean, honestly, when, when I wrote the piece in, and even in doing my dissertation research and writing a chapter on these same issues, the goal was really simply to start a conversation, start conversations, you know, such as this one. And conversations that will at least get us beyond sort of an uncritical adherence to these design conventions, which I think, are deeply embedded in our field. And that's really the goal is just to really start conversations and get us thinking through. And I hope that, you know, in having these conversations, people will start to kind of have different ideas of different ways of doing things. And, you know, over time, perhaps those ideas will come to fruition.

Nicole Milano 13:59

Now, for many archivists, the reality of implementing physical changes to reading rooms can be very challenging. There may be high profile donors who prefer the traditional experience, for example, or the archivist struggle with a lack of resources. What are your suggestions for archivists who may not have the institutional buy in, or the resources to implement true physical change, but have the desire to which steps forward can they begin to take?

Jesse Erickson 14:26

Well, thank you for that question. In particular, because I, you know, although I've been critical of the spaces sort of throughout my career and my education, you know, I, I also really, really value you know, some of the more conventional reading room spaces. And, you know, I kind of fear sometimes that that gets lost in the piece. You know, they can be extremely aesthetically beautiful, of course, and are inspiring, and I think there's a value to their historicity and their ability to sort of inspire. So I don't think that the gentleman studies should be the default for interior design in all cases. And I think that, you know, other design models may be a better fit for other institutions and organizations, particularly those that that service underserved or minoritized populations, right. But there are situations I that I know of where there's, you know, donor preferences for tradition, you know, have a lot of sway. And I think, in those cases, you know, those traditions can and probably shouldn't be upheld, it's a matter of being, to me, at least, it's a matter of being accountable, being transparent, and really kind of being reparative with the contextualization of the spaces when you're dealing with situations like that. So you can always begin, you can always start there with that sort of accountability, right, that transparency, and that's being transparent about the history of how those spaces came to be and what what they represent. So I think community outreach can go a long way. And you can do a lot with curatorial practice, in a way that you can find, perhaps problematic histories that these spaces may be tied to, you know, a number of universities, major universities, even across the country, have reached a point where they're, they're starting to unearth these these buried ties to gender paste, and racial violence, and other forms of injustice that have been, I think, over time purposefully, perhaps obscured by the more sanitized narratives that for years have just been accepted prima facie. But um, so I think there's, you know, we're experiencing a shift in that regard. And certainly, you know, even on campus, I work off we have the UDs anti racist initiative that's starting to ask those questions about, you know, ties to the history of racial injustice on our campus. And so, you know, we're part of sort of a larger movement. So that's, you know, that's the transparency. That's the accountability. And then the reparative work comes with that. And it's part of that racial reckoning, I think. But there's always more that can be done to improve relations by really just acknowledging these histories.

JoyEllen Williams 17:29

You wrote theory opens the door for long-term structural change, that should and must occur over time, and quote, bell hooks a statement on theory and practice? Could you share what that means to you? And which theories most underpin your work?

Jesse Erickson 17:47

Yeah, I mean, it's really, it's a really a question of a praxis that depth, you know, that has informed so much of our work that's rooted in black feminist theory, of course, by feminist thought. But something that I eventually came to understand while I was in graduate graduate school is that, you know, theory starts with the scholarship and then woven into the pedagogy, and lose its way to the field and in policymaking discourses, those policymaking discourses that occur and committees and board meetings, right, eventually shaping the decisions of administrators and directors, right, and making its way to, you know, the practice of faculty and staff. Right. And I am aware that it's not unidirectional, of course, right. I mean, it's not, you know, it's not always sort of a top down thing, it can be bottom up top down, and, you know, everything in between, but there is a certain flow is the exchange of ideas and how they become realized in professional practice. Right. So, to me, I remember

that in graduate school, that was because I was in a library program that focused on the masters, right, that was very professional practice based, and then a PhD program that was very much invested in theory and ideas, and, you know, sort of going through the program. And seeing it through to, you know, the doctorate I remember, there was a lot of back and forth about, you know, the value of theory in in sort of the professional practice classes, right. There, it seems, it seems to me that there was a sort of a dichotomy there, right, among the student body, where, you know, folks that were in the doctoral program or sometimes less interested in, you know, the professional practice and then, you know, folks that were in a master's program were less interested in theory, but to me, they were always sort of interwoven and you know, are integral to each other. So this is something that I've always pretty much maintained. And I think that, you know, whether you're looking at professional practice, right, or you're looking at theory, they all kind of affect one another. And so for me, I mean, there are some theoretical and meta theoretical frameworks that have had a tremendous influence in my wave of thinking and approaching the field. The three that probably have had the most impact are Afro pessimism, strategic presentism and retro futurism. And these ideas kind of circulate throughout all my work. So I go back to them again, and again, in sort of a constant refrain.

Nicole Milano 20:46
Now, Jesse, we know that you also work in the digital realm, what can we learn from the history you shared, and how it might apply to the still emerging digital spaces and virtual reading rooms, which have especially impacted us during the COVID 19 pandemic?

Jesse Erickson 20:59
Absolutely. And I'm really interested in that concept of interiority, and the pandemic really pushed my thinking, in that regard, because I taught a lot on Zoom. And I even taught a class on critical bibliography where we were learning descriptive bibliography, and I had to think through ways of, of teaching that remotely. And I employed, you know, sort of low tech VR, low tech, virtual reality, the kind of cardboard VR is a way to really dive into the interiority of the digital spaces, right? Because I saw it as an opportunity to explore the sort of elasticity of the ways in which we look at speciality itself, right. But digital spaces I found, I find a kind of, they can often follow this in the same direction, right, as our as our analog and other kind of spaces, right? I mean, they fall into the same traps, you know, falling into the same sort of design templates that are informed by convention. And I think what I mean is like the information architecture of these spaces, they facing many of the same limitations. As you know, when we're employing interior design in in like a reading room, perhaps we should give an example that I remember when, when web 1.0 This is a long time ago, web 1.0 used to try to, like emulate the world of paper documents, very, very text heavy, right? Much different digital space than the web 2.0 and beyond. But, uh, makes me think of when, you know, terms, like, lead page, right, and issues for e-magazines, and, you know, the sort of vestiges of the paper based world and how it migrated into these digital spaces. So there's, there's a conversation to be heard about, you know, the relationship between our digital spaces and, and spaces that we interact with, in the quote, unquote, physical world, I tend to think of the digital as materials. So I don't like to create a binary between, you know, digital environments and environments that we interact with in, you know, in person. Because the digital is just another form of material. And I think a lot of the language around the digital kind of makes it seem like it's, it almost exists somewhere else, it exists with us. But, you know, I think more than that there, I mean, that is a number of scholars are noting that I'm thinking of sofinnova. Now, people bring their biases to the design, right of these spaces. And it feeds into algorithms in of

content creation, and even information retrieval. So we really have to be critical about how we design our digital spaces, right. And we have to kind of think, through the same questions as we would in a reading room about the device, the sort of default design conventions that are embedded in the platforms that sometimes we don't even have the option of changing, right? Why this color scheme is being used over that one and the like. And why we're choosing this template over another. And, you know, that kind of critical questioning I think will go a long way in sort of addressing the issue of the same problems that we are finding in the reading room space, cropping up in the ways that you design digital spaces.

JoyEllen Williams 24:49
That's absolutely fascinating. And you end the piece by inviting readers to imagine alternate reading rooms, like pop ups and when designed for Hip Hop archive. So with our final question, we also invite you to do some imagining, what superpower would you most like to have? And why?

Jesse Erickson 25:12
I mean, if I've learned anything from reading comic books, and manga, I'm a fan of both and love manga. But what would you learn as superpowers are kind of like curses? You know, because they always come with unforeseen consequences. So yeah, I mean, I wouldn't, you know, if, if there were the powers that be that were going to, you know, grabbing with some kind of superpower, I probably would try to wish it away, or, you know, take the X-Men approach or being like, I don't, you know, I don't want this in my life. But, no, no, in all seriousness, I, to be honest, I often view my, my literacy practices as something of a superpower, you know, because I know that my desire for learning is transformed my life so much for the better, right. And this goes all the way back to my youth. You know, I remember neatness. In my youngest years, you know, as, as I became a better reader, and we got our first encyclopedia set. And just going through, and just picking topics and learning about this and learning about that. I mean, of course, you know, looking back, the encyclopedia entries were very problematic and biased in numerous ways that so I can meet them with different eyes, of course, but, no, I mean, just that I had sort of an insatiable desire for, you know, pursuing the intellectual curiosity, curiosity and the literacy practice that I was able to acquire. Support very much supported that and I really don't take that for granted. So, I mean, I have to say, like, reading is a superpower. You know, it really is. And it's something that's overlooked. And, I definitely don't overlook that. So, yeah, I would have to say, just reading.

Nicole Milano 27:22
And that's a very appropriate superpower given your work. So good answer. So thank you so much for speaking with us today. Jesse, we hope you enjoyed sharing your perspectives with us as much as we enjoyed hearing them. You've given us so many insightful points to think about after today's conversation, including how we can expand the boundaries of how we advance knowledge. So thank you so much for listening, everyone. Until next time, happy reading. Thank you. You've just listened to an episode of Archives in Context, the official podcast at the Society of American Archivists. Members of the podcast team include Bethany Anderson, Chris Burns, Mary Caldera, Nicole Milano Lolita Rowe, Anna Trammell, and JoyEllen Williams. Opinions expressed in this podcast are our own and are not reflective of a particular institution. Be sure to subscribe and rate us on iTunes if you enjoyed what you heard. And join us again next time.