



Archives in Context

Season 5 Episode 4: Petrina Jackson and Verónica Reyes-Escudero

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SPEAKERS

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Nicole Milano 00:10

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.

JoyEllen Williams 00:27

Hi, everyone, and welcome to another episode of *Archives in Context*. My name is JoyEllen, and I'm here with my cohost, Nicole Milano.

Nicole Milano 00:37

Hi, everyone. During this special season of *Archives in Context*, in which we examine how the events of 2020 and now 2021 have affected archivists, we want to remind all of our listeners to consider supporting the Archival Workers Emergency Fund. You can find out more through the SAA website at www.archivists.org.

JoyEllen Williams 00:59

Thanks, Nicole. Today, we're here with Verónica Reyes-Escudero, who is the Katheryne B. Willock Head of Special Collections at the University of Arizona's university libraries, and Petrina Jackson, who serves as director of the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University's Bird Library. Verónica and Petrina are also the past chair and current chair, respectively, of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association. In August 2020, Petrina and Verónica wrote a letter to their colleagues in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, or RBMS, calling for action to recognize and destroy structural and systemic racism and inequality in our workplaces and profession. We're so pleased to have them here with us today and talk about their letter titled, "A Call for Justice." Welcome, Petrina and Verónica.

Petrina Jackson 02:06

Thank you for having us.

JoyEllen Williams 02:10

Before we dive into your letter, I wonder whether you could tell our listeners about RBMS for those who are not familiar with it.

Petrina Jackson 02:20

This is Petrina. RBMS is an organization that represents librarians who work with rare books, manuscripts, and other special collections, and we represent their interests and promote this work.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 02:40

This is Verónica. It's a section within the Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association.

Nicole Milano 02:50

Great. So, we want to turn now to the "Call for Justice." Your letter to RBMS colleagues is not only a condemnation of the killing of George Floyd by officers of the Minneapolis Police Department, but also a call to action in three areas: what we can do for ourselves, our institutions, and our professions. Could you talk about your decision to take that approach?

Petrina Jackson 03:13

Yes. So oftentimes, we wanted to make sure that we went from not only from a view from the organizational level, but also a personal view, because it really takes a lot of personal reflection in order to make these types of changes. When you change the way people think about things or bring things to their awareness, it helps to - to motivate them to make organizational change as well. And also, for me, I've been in a lot of environments where librarians, particularly white librarians, when you talk to them they always want to know, "Well, what can we do? What can we do?" And so, Verónica and I have given kind of like a- came together and gave a little bit of a- not a blueprint, but a guide, and here are tangible things you can do. To answer to the question, you know, kind of a question that I always see is like helplessness, like because they didn't know what to do. So there you have it, it's like, here's a guide that we can move forward and make some tangible change.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 04:35

There's also you know, there was this urgency at the time, but we had already been under the COVID pandemic, and there was a, for me, a sense of time for, as Petrina said, reflection and I've- I've often been saying you know that this is a time that has been given to us to kind of pause, stop our sort of urgent day to day life and really consider the importance of reflection. And in- in- in this particular case, because we were already under the pandemic, it was important for us to really point out that responsibility that we had to ourselves individually to the organization. And then, of course, for the profession, because as a professional organization, we're trying to, you know- in trying to lead that group we wanted to kind of show that there's a responsibility across the board. It's not just the individual, not just the institution, not just a profession, but all of them at once.

JoyEllen Williams 05:43

You both touched on this idea of personal responsibility and action, and one of the actions you listed for individuals was intervention, when we see acts of microaggressions or racism, however casual. This is sometimes articulated in trainings as moving from safe spaces into brave spaces. How can archivists and special collections librarians move into those brave spaces at an individual level?

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 06:15

For me, it depends on the position that you're in and also the capacity you feel you have. So, from my perspective as a department head, I model putting forward opportunities for us to discuss or at least I- I try to do, you know, coming from a very personal perspective, showing vulnerability when it's appropriate so that others can feel they can show up, you know, being themselves. So to me, that's a safe space is- is the sense of you belong here, you know, warts and all. I mean we all are human, and we want to know- we want to be able to belong in a space so that we can actually be vulnerable, so that we can actually be our full selves and- and make the changes that we need, you know. I'm not- I'm not saying, you know, don't be respectful and all of those things, but- but I think that when people can feel like they belong in a space, that is the best antidote for- for trying to grow in these- in these particular situations.

Petrina Jackson 07:35

I like the emphasis on modeling behavior. I also think that the more people learn themselves about kind of intervening into situation or about injustices and everything, that they become- they're armed with knowledge. And oftentimes, when you're armed with more knowledge, you'd have more confidence to speak up against injustice, or when you see something's a little off, or you know, you're- you become bolder, and you can with more confidence make that, you know, intervene when someone's hurting another person or saying something inappropriate. So, I think, you know, the cliché "knowledge is power" helps. But modeling absolutely helps because if you are modeling that behavior, then it does bring confidence to folks and think, "Hey, I can speak up," even if it's outside of this- that environment that is a safe space.

Nicole Milano 08:49

So, you both mentioned modeling good behavior, but do you have any recommendations for librarians and archivists who may not have that kind of leadership, or rather, may have leaders that are modeling bad behavior in this area? What can they do?

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 09:04

For me, I mean, I think that's where you really draw on your courage. We all have responsibility, regardless of what it looks like for us. Now it may be not safe and you may not be able to do it, you know, but you can talk to people aside to show them support. I think that a lot of people suffer because they feel unacknowledged. And so I mean, I don't know it's- I tend to be a little bit Pollyanna sometimes but, and I have always felt like I can speak up when necessary, regardless of my leadership, regardless of their competency in that area, right, and regardless of my own honesty, because, you know, we're all growing, we're all learning. So I think- but I do think that you know, mustering courage in yourself to speak up is part of your responsibility when you can. It is often left up to people of color and that isn't always safe, so I'm not saying... don't do it if you don't feel courageous,

and if you don't feel like you're going to be supported. But you know, I don't know, I mean, it's- it's- it's- it takes a lot of courage to speak up for sure.

Petrina Jackson 10:21

I think too that people have to ask themselves, what am I going to- to lose? And if it's just emotional discomfort, it's not enough. That- that is a lack of courage, and, you know, or am I really not saying things because I'm protecting my status, or I'm protecting my privilege or advantage, um. They need to really kind of interrogate themselves and see what, you know, they're protecting because for BIPOC folks you really don't have that option, like it's your life you're living, you can't stand outside of your life. And you have to- unless you want to get run over, you have to state your piece, you have to let people know. And oftentimes the way systems are designed, people will listen to white people when they speak up. So for white librarians, archivists, or whatever, they really do need to use their voices, if they- if they believe, you know, if these statements aren't to be empty statements, or whatever. We go through this round- these rounds of, "Oh, another horrible thing has happened, and, you know, this is not who we are," kind of thing, or, you know, "We have these values," well show it, you know, step out there and show it. Because a lot of times, you know, white librarians and archivists you have the protection of- of your- of your color, of your status in the organization, in your status in the United States. It may not feel like you do, but, you know, I think that people need to interrogate what- what is the source of the discomfort? Because it may not be danger, there is no, you know, danger. And in stating, speaking truth to power sometimes. I mean, it could be, but it usually isn't.

Nicole Milano 12:42

And speaking of empty statements, a common criticism of organizations has been the quote, support email, a statement of support for anti-racist activity, which sometimes is not followed by any further tangible action by the institution. Could you describe some examples of what you believe has worked at the institutional level?

Petrina Jackson 13:03

I think that at the institutional level, when you have an administration- the highest level of administration says we're doing this, and this is an outline of what they're going to do, instead of waiting for all the grassroots bubbling up of the thing, that's great. But instead of just waiting or having a passive response to everything, if you really believe in DEI, diversity, equity and inclusion, then it's not reactive, it is part of your value system, it is part of the structures that you create. It's a- you know and that happens at the top level. And that's really, I think, that's the key to success, when the top really buys into it and everything that they do reflects that. And so I think a lot of times, when it's not, it comes, you know, it'll be one off; this person doing this and this person doing that, but it's not a unified effort that creates an infrastructure where- and the operationalize the end, that's what needs to happen. It needs to be operationalized. That is not just reacting to something like, "Oh, I don't want to look bad. I don't want our reputation to suffer because of this thing that has happened."

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 14:34

I agree with Petrina that if it comes from the highest administrative position it, you know, honestly, even if- even if we're not going to solve the whole situation, but just that there's commitment- immediate commitment, and that they don't have to be brought along, I think goes a long way. Now, on the other hand, if- if there are tepid steps into it, at least there are tepid steps into it moving forward, you know, and it may be that- that those

administrators need to be brought along. But I completely agree that when it's done immediately by- with- with conviction, with authenticity from the top, and then put forward specific objectives to moving forward, that's when it works the best. And your- and your staff notices that. Absolutely they notice that. You know, there's chatter immediately after if it's not done and immediately after if it is done.

JoyEllen Williams 15:45

Let's continue this discussion of the institutional level. In your letter, you call on archivists to look at their buildings and redecorate if artwork is exclusionary or demeaning to people of color. Scholars such as Dr. Ashley Farmer and Dr. Jesse Erickson also addressed this issue in recent articles. However, some archivists work in institutions that rely on endowments from longstanding donors, and the idea of redecorating may receive pushback. What are some ways archivists can work collaboratively with one another and with institutional leadership to make these changes?

Petrina Jackson 16:26

I think there needs to be an educational process amongst folks at universities or institutions, wherever they are- I work at a university- but at an institution with their development and with donors. Because when I think about having DEI, it's not outside of donor relations too, that has to be pulled in. And that's part of the relationship too because it's an incredible amount of power that donors have, and, you know, a lot of people- when people flash who have capacity, you know, institutions want that money or whatever, they will sometimes compromise in ways that they shouldn't. But donors need to be pulled along and basically told the values of the institution or taught the values of- these DEI values of institution mean "This is where we stand." And here's how we, you know, here's how we can make this a more inclusive environment, here's how we can pull in even more people, more people who maybe weren't considered donors before to make an even stronger- a stronger institution. Because I often think that people lose- because people are used to a particular- people are used to a particular donor, you know, usually older, usually white, often male, they keep reproducing those types of donors. And if you really want an institution to thrive, you need to widen what you think a donor is, who a donor is, and invite other people because it just makes your- your institution stronger. And so, that's what I think people need to see the value in it and everything. It's not a deficit, it's not a weakness, it's a strength, and making an institution reflective of its population, or the population of the areas in- and it is- it- it tears down institutional oppression when you do that. And I think people need to be clear that they are part of this institutional oppression if they are afraid to redecorate or bring in more photographs, murals, or whatever that are reflective of many instead- instead of just one particular- particular community. Verónica, I don't know if you want to share about the mural or whatever that you- you know that because that was a- that is a great embodiment of, you know, an example.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 19:50

Yeah, so the the story that Petrina was referring to is my experience in going to Dartmouth where the LALI institute, the instruction institute up there at Dartmouth, and there- there's this- a colleague took me down to the basement of the library, and they had this amazing, amazing Diego Rivera mural. Just, you know, multiple walls. I guess he was there I think in the 30s or 40s. But it was just, you know, I'm in the middle of white America in a way, right, and I'm- my- my heritage, I'm Mexican, and to see my people represented in the basement of this library, it was beautiful. It was- it became like my little respite, you know, it was an intense week, it was amazing- an amazing week, but I was also had gone through some things and- and was actually just, you know,

in the middle of hearing whether or not I actually got my position, you know, and there I was, and so it became a refuge. And I can only imagine, I think if- if we can only imagine if students, and faculty, and the community sees themselves represented in our buildings, it's so important, so important and beyond, I think what we can really explain. What Petrina was also talking about is our donors and- and acknowledging that there are donors beyond those who give in a monetary way. They're those donors that are in kind donors that enrich in- enrich, sorry, our collections, and thus the research that faculty and students can do. So, I was having this discussion with a donor who was- went to the- my university when- when they were, you know, but a couple of handful of people of Mexican American descent, and they are some of the- the strongest supporters of the university. They're the ones that are talking up the university, who go to all the games, or at least watch the games, and support their students. And they very much recognize that they are not recognized as donors because they don't have the monetary will- wherewithal, you know, or they haven't been at that point. But that they- they admonished the university for not having representations of this community who has been a support for this institution. So, you know, we, like Petrina said, we do need to expand on our- how we think about donors and be courageous again, because I have an example of, you know, a donor offering some kind of artwork that has nothing to do with the university. And yet, and I understand, you know, administrators are then having to handle this thing because it could be a multimillion dollar donation, but the thing- the artwork has nothing to do with either the culture or the university. So, people have to stand up and be courageous when those things come up. And I think that you'd be surprised if you speak with people with, you know, even this donor, you may actually be surprised at their response, "Oh, you know, I didn't really think about that. How can- what can I contribute to- to- to move your objectives forward if- if diversity, equity, and inclusion is part of your objective? So, I don't think- we can't be afraid to shy away from, "You know what? I can't receive that donation under the circumstances, but here's what we would like, or here's what we would need, here's how you can contribute." So anyway, so I think that we have to have these discussions and learn, I think, like Petrina said, education of our ourselves, but also our administrators.

Petrina Jackson 24:03

And also, to have a collaborative or not- to have a partnership relationship with donors, because it often- it often appears, or in actuality, it becomes a relationship of a servant- a servant relationship; "Oh, they're giving me money so I have to give them everything," you know. And that's not- you want to appeal to the values of the donor, but you want to- it needs to be a mutual understanding, in a respect, so both parties can get what they want not, "Oh, I want the money, and I'm just going to compromise in every way in order to get it," because it's just a dysfunctional relationship. You've set up a dysfunctional relationship that can go on for decades and decades, and oftentimes a court donors' children in everything, and then it just, it reproduces that negative- the relationship reproduces. And it's like, we have to do better than that. If something- like if there's demeaning art or whatever, that just needs to be addressed straight out, there's nothing to, you know, where's the argument that needs to be removed? It just does. Because if you hearken to the values, or the mission and the vision of the organization, if it's outside of that, then the institution needs to be called out on that. And so, you know, what really are your values? And remove something that is demeaning, or, you know, to an institution.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 25:48

And- and I think also that librarians and archivists need to be joining, or attending, or learning from development officer organizations, like ALADN would be one of them; it's the Academic Library Advancement

Network, something like that... Advancement and Development Network. Yeah. Because I think the- these organizations are actually recognizing this issue- these issues of diversity, equity, and initiative. So I think that if we're at those tables, we can make those changes, you know, learn and- learn and educate at the same time.

Nicole Milano 26:34

So, we've talked today about action at the individual level and the institutional level, and now we want to talk about action at the professional level. How can professional groups such as the Society of American Archivists and RBMS work together to identify and root out systemic racism and create a culture of anti-racism?

Petrina Jackson 26:55

I think there are a variety of ways we could do that. It would be cool to have, one day, be able to have a joint conference, and maybe thematically deal with it. But just to have a joint conference with RBMS and SAA just to get those two communities together to network, and just kind of, not compare notes, but to see the good work that each- each organization is doing. But also, there are opportunities like SAA, you know, as you all know, had the listening forums. And- and that could be an opportunity to join together with RBMS and have one with both memberships around anti-racism. So, you know, it can be informal like that, or it could be formal, like we have different task forces that are made up of SAA and RBMS and other organizations in order to tackle, you know, like public services and things like that. It could be one on anti-racism. So, in the profession, and how do you, you know, kind of manifest strong anti-racist measure in, you know, your organization. Those are just a few things that could happen.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 28:27

And I think, you know, it's probably time for us to audit our organizations to see where we are, but early on RBMS set goals to diversify, not just the- not just the section, but the profession. It's a little bit harder, I think, to do the audit of the profession, but we can certainly audit the section to see how far we've come if- if, you know, and how far have we really come? Early on Petrina was part of that- that at that point it was a taskforce for diversity. So, some of the changes that we made in RBMS were based off of some of- some numbers that colleagues pulled together to recognize the- the underrepresentation of a specific- specific people of color not, you know- we weren't- we were very clear about what RBMS wanted. Diversity was very well defined. At that point it was the federally recognized underrepresented workers. So, I think that's one thing that we need to kind of get back to is be very clear about what we mean. Of course, that group has grown now, right, but I think an audit is necessary at this point just to see where we are and where we want to move the needle forward. One thing that RBMS has started to do is provide scholarships for colleagues who are coming on the second time around, right? And as we explore kind of, you know, how- how can we increase membership of underrepresented groups in committee work, which is where decisions are being made, which- which is where the networks are, which is where, you know, people can more fully contribute to their profession and be seen for, you know, the great things that they're- that they can bring. So, you know, there's movement there, but- but- but we have a long way to go.

JoyEllen Williams 29:04

Speaking of moving forward, we are conducting this interview on January 20, the day of Joe Biden's and Kamala Harris' inauguration. For many of us, this is a day of hope and looking forward to four years that will be very

different from the last four years. What do you hope our profession will look like in four years, particularly in terms of the creation of a more inclusive, professional community?

Petrina Jackson 31:12

I hope in four years that there will be more people in positions of power within libraries and library organizations that look like me, that look like Verónica, that, you know, look like other people of color, because I see that as a huge asset in any organization. And I think that we have to keep emphasizing that it's an asset to have people who have lived experience as a person of color, who, you know, know what those challenges are, and who is a person who's committed to designing an organization that really values all of those different stories, all of those different narratives and who's familiar with it. So, you know, it won't be- it's not such a leap for some people. Or this feeling of discomfort about talking about race, or sex, or gender, or whatever the case may be, in a way that is constructive for an institution to really move forward in the twenty-first century.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 32:54

Maybe it's maybe tagging- tagging along with Petrina, what she was saying in terms of, you know, seeing more people of color in roles of leadership, there is this book that I read a long time ago that's called *There Are No Grown-Ups*, you know, and it's essentially saying, it's essentially about like the midlife crisis that we're kind of in at this point, where we actually see ourselves as the grown up, right? There's nobody else to look back to or look up to, or that we're- we're kind of in a- in a way, you know, being the leaders, I guess, at this point. I would love to have so many more options in terms of who we look up to. I think it is such a- it's- it makes such a difference in terms of getting people to feel like they belong, as opposed to fitting in to an institution and to a profession. And honestly, you know, in- in the communities that we are in. So, I- I just do hope that we continue to grow that profession and that way that it looks more inclusive because richer ideas come from more inclusivity.

Nicole Milano 34:15

So now we come to the question that we ask all of our guests on *Archives in Context*, and that is, if you each could have any superpower, what would it be? And why?

Petrina Jackson 34:26

If I could have a superpower- I'm a person who always wants to know why. Why did that happen? Why did this person do this? Always want to know why. And so if I had a superpower, it would be knowing people's intent, knowing people's motivation. Because when I know people's intent and real motivation, it helps me to plan a course on how to strategize around or with them. So that- I really wish, because I ask that question often, like, why did they do that? Or do they really believe such and such, or whatever? But if I knew, it would be so much easier to know how to- to deal or communicate with people in order to get, you know, a positive outcome.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 35:31

When Petrina and I talked about this question before I told her I can't come up with another one. I'm going to have to piggyback on yours because, and I thought, okay, you know, between then and now, I would come up with a different one, but I just could not. But I think it resonated so much with me, because, you know, we're- we're kind of I think, as professionals that, you know- you know, it's- you know, so we call ourselves people of color. As POCs, we, I think we've, at least for me, I've learned to second guess my thoughts a lot in- in the

structures that have not been created, by me, for me, right, that people like me, for me. So there is always this need of trying to jump ahead and guess what people are needing and trying to, in a way, weirdly kind of catering to whatever the structure is. There's always an agenda, you know, that's happening that we're not privy to. And because we're kind of operating or at least, you know, for me, I- I sometimes feel like I'm operating under a sense of they're not- they don't fully believe in me that I- you know, because we're told that we're- that we don't belong, right. And so just- just knowing what people's motivations are, what people's agendas are, will help me, you know, navigate that, and negotiate what our objectives are, or how to get to those objectives, and just in a much more transparent way. So, I think that's why I couldn't- I just couldn't think of anything else. Because I thought about invisibility, but I'm like but then I don't want to be there if I don't meet- if I- if I'm not wanted there, you know, either. I'm not that. I'm not that. I'm a rule follower, so I don't want to break into people's homes or into the conference room that I don't belong to, you know, belong in.

Petrina Jackson 37:46

Not if you don't take anything.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 37:52

I'm just listening.

Petrina Jackson 37:53

You're like Harry Potter in the invisibility cloak!

Nicole Milano 38:01

This was so wonderful. Thank you both so much for sharing your thoughts behind the "Call for Justice," and how we all can and should take action moving forward. It was an absolute pleasure speaking with you both today.

Verónica Reyes-Escudero 38:14

Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Petrina Jackson 38:16

Yes.

Nicole Milano 38:19

You've just listened to an episode of *Archives in Context*, the official podcast of the Society of American Archivists. Members of the podcast team include Bethany Anderson, Chris Burns, JoyEllen Freeman (Williams), Nicole Milano, Colleen McFarland Rademaker, and Anna Trammell. Opinions expressed in this podcast are our own and are not reflective of a particular institution. Be sure to like us on iTunes if you enjoyed what you heard and join us again next time.