Episode 1 Title: Necessary, Pressing, and Public Conversations. The Slave Dwelling Project and the Indigenous D.C. iOS App

Guests: Joseph McGill and Elizabeth Rule

Hosts: Ece Turnator (ET) and Laura Wilson (LW)

Episode Abstract: This episode is about missing narratives in U.S. history and why adding those narratives into the mainstream is necessary and pressing. Our interviewees are Joseph McGill and Elizabeth Rule. Joseph McGill is a historic interpreter at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens in South Carolina and the founder of the Slave Dwelling Project, an initiative that seeks to raise awareness of the hidden stories of enslaved individuals at popular historic and national heritage sites. Elizabeth Rule is assistant professor of critical race, gender and culture studies at the American University in Washington, DC. She is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation. She studies gendered violence, reproductive justice, and Indigenous governance. For this episode we talked to her about the mobile app her team designed, The Guide to Indigenous D.C., which aims to add the missing Indigenous narrative into the mainstream.

Introduction

Narration (LW): Hello and welcome to the FLAME podcast, where we explore the Future Libraries, Archives, and Museums in Excavation. My name is Laura Wilson, and I am a CLIR Postdoctoral Fellow at Fisk University in Nashville.

Narration (ET): And I am Ece Turnator, humanities and digital scholarship librarian at MIT Libraries. In this podcast series we analyze the interviews we conducted with people who work in the cultural heritage world of museums, libraries, galleries, and archives, as well as scholars who are a part of that world. This episode is about missing narratives in US history and why adding those narratives into the mainstream is necessary and pressing, referring to our first episode’s title, “Necessary, Pressing, and Public Conversations. The Slave Dwelling Project and the Indigenous D.C. iOS App.”

Narration (LW): In this first series of FLAME, we analyze and elevate recurrent topics in the interviews we conducted. The full interviews are inspiring in their own right and will be available on our project website. Our interviewees today are Joseph McGill and
Elizabeth Rule. Joseph (or Joe) McGill is a historic interpreter at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens in South Carolina, and the founder of the Slave Dwelling Project, an initiative that seeks to raise awareness of the hidden stories of enslaved individuals at popular historic and national heritage sites. A quick disclaimer for our listeners also that there is some recurrent background noise in a number of Joe’s clips, which we hope are not too detracting from hearing his important message. Here’s Joe in his own words:

Joseph McGill: *I've gone to 25 states and the District of Columbia spending nights and slave dwellings I've slept in about 150, maybe about 200 plus sleepovers. And they're in that number 200 plus because some of these places I've slept in, you know, more than once. So yeah, there is that count now, you know, going in 11 years ago, there were some of those places that said no to my request. Some of those places have since come back around and they are now part of the portfolio, but even with that, there are still those places out there that you know, I'm trying to get into my ultimate quest of course, is the, is the White House because our enslaved ancestors, you know, built that and they, they, they worked there, they were enslaved there. You know, 12 of our former presidents were slave owners, eight of whom were slave owners while they were in office.*

Narration (ET): Wow, what I admire about this project is the fact that it provides a sense of the direct contact with history that Joe’s visits encourage. The first time I heard him speak about his work here, it gave me the feeling of being in a space that is important, even though left invisible. And the necessity to remember that space, as part of the historical narrative, a location imbued with historical significance—making the narrative that is intentionally left invisible, visible. This is certainly something that our second guest Elizabeth Rule’s work is keen to do as well.

Elizabeth is currently an assistant professor of critical race, gender and culture studies at the American University in Washington, DC. She is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, one of the tribes native to the Southeast who were forced to move to the so-called Indian territory as a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 under President Andrew Jackson. Today the tribe’s HQ is in Ada, Oklahoma.

Elizabeth studies gendered violence, reproductive justice, and Indigenous governance. The Guide to Indigenous D.C. app should be viewed in that context: above all as service work to Indigenous students who spend years in the city. In that sense, Elizabeth adds the missing Indigenous narrative into the mainstream.

Here’s Elizabeth in her own words:
Elizabeth Rule: I really am working to make some insights and contributions that address contemporary important issues for Indigenous communities today. I’m probably going to talk about it as we continue our conversation, but one of the main things that I see in my work, again, as an Indigenous scholar working in Indigenous studies is that oftentimes our topics are related only to are relegated only to the past into a historical context. And so I’m really trying to make an intervention by directing my work toward, you know, what’s before Congress right now that can support tribal communities. What are you know, tribal nations doing on the ground to better the lives of their, you know, citizens. And that relates, I think, to the Indigenous DC work, as well as to my, my work on gendered violence.

Three Words

Narration (LW): So in every interview we conduct for this podcast series, we ask our participants to choose three words or phrases that best describe the work that they do. This question often takes interviewees a while to mull over and is sometimes expressed through multiple clips. We’ve decided to summarize and analyze their choices here, but you can check out their full considerations of this exercise on our podcast website. Let’s start with Joe.

Narration (ET): Joe sees the work he does as necessary and his first word choice. And if I think back over his whole interview there’s a sense of urgency and that if he doesn’t do it, if he doesn’t highlight the dwellings of the enslaved then the stories of those people and the politics of slavery will not be told. He has to persist—and persist is his second word choice—in doing this, and he has to believe that it will succeed. His third word, “believe,” is I think a reference to how difficult a task it is and how thankless but he has to shoulder it and soldier on.

Narration (LW): Yes, absolutely. Joe has to be persistent so that people take notice of his work and begin to realize just how necessary it is. Elizabeth meanwhile focused on how indigienity is a central concern for her work, demonstrating her own ancestral connection to the research at hand. She spoke of the work being pressing, much as Joe described his as necessary, clearly showing the real need for the type of work these
two are doing. Elizabeth’s third word was public-facing and as our upcoming excerpts show, she concentrated a lot on the public impact of her app in particular. Joe’s interview was also demonstrative of how his job at Magnolia, and the outreach of the Slave Dwelling Project, are heavily invested in interacting with the public.

PART 1: Mapping the Unmapped

Narration (ET): It was interesting to me how Joe re-evaluated the Deep South as the locus of enslaved dwellings and encouraged people to remember the North’s involvement too.

Joseph McGill: You know, a lot of folks ask, well, how many slave dwellings there are in these United States? I don’t know the answer to that question. You know, I’m 11 years into this project and don’t know. I do know that 11 years ago, I was limited in my way of thinking, because I had slave dwellings relegated to plantations in Southern states. And of course that was a relevant place for them because, you know, it did take a civil war and the Thirteenth Amendment to free people in those Southern states. But we would also have to take into account that there are other states to where slavery existed because in the 25 states that have gone to eight of those have been Northern states. So, people are quite surprised when I tell them that. And I get a lot of pushback when I tell them that all that slavery existed in those Northern states also. And because slavery existed in those Northern states that I know that this project will continue to prosper as it continues to reveal those places.

Narration (LW): Despite some resistance to his important work, Joe encourages us to consider the continuing legacies of the past, by sleeping in the same places that enslaved peoples dwelled. Many of these places exist in parallel to the stereotypical Big House of the White planter class; Joe is keen to make the intimate histories of this invisible and exploited labor force more widely known, even if some of the historical context can raise traumatic specters.

Joseph McGill: Well, you know, it was, it was all things that weren’t, it’s that missing element that, that desire to visit all things or buildings. But in doing that, you find that missing element. You see that the people who you derive your DNA from, their stories are missing from these places, you know, and you’re doing, in my case, a job for the National Trust for Historic Preservation and, and seeing all the resources and effort they put into saving iconic buildings, which is fine. That’s a good thing—it’s necessary,
but you also find a missing element in all that. But from that, you learn that, uh, you know, there's some, some things there that you can apply to the places that you care about, the places that can help you tell the stories that are not being told.

Narration (LW): In order to bring back that history then, Joe brings the lives of the enslaved people to the forefront of people’s minds. A particularly evocative example that he often retells at events involves a plantation in Texas.

Joseph McGill: So, there's, once there's this one situation in Texas where I went in and stood on an authentic auction block, Brenham Texas Seward Plantation, stood on an authentic auction block. And that was one of the most memorable moments of this journey that I'm on, you know, standing on an auction block and thinking about the people who stood on auction blocks, because someone was bidding on them, but, and for that person bidding on you, you have to bare your back to show that that potential buyer, that their name on any marks on your back from being whipped, cause that's a sign, of course, and then a defiant enslaved person. And, you know, you don't want a defiant, you don't want to buy a defiant enslaved person to insert into your already docile and broken and enslaved people.

Joseph McGill: So, you know, you think about those things when you, if you stand on an auction block or someone gets those same kinds of feelings when they, when they spend the night in these, in these places. One thing that I've been doing a lot lately is when I go to these sites, I look for fingerprints and bricks. If they're brick structures, you know, built prior to the Civil War, because I know those bricks were made by enslaved people and in some of those bricks are some fingerprints. And so you'll see me diligently looking for fingerprints when I visit these sites.

Narration (ET): Joe goes into slave dwellings and touches the physical remnants of the lives of enslaved people. In fact, we chose one of the photos you took, Laura, of a fingerprinted brick from Traveler’s Rest in Nashville, TN, as representative of our series. Can you talk a little more about that and shed some light on what Joe is referring to when he mentions bricks?

Narration (LW): Yes, for sure. So when Joe came to visit Oxford, Mississippi, with the project he talked about locating these fingerprints, which are the marks of (usually) young children who would be working on the brickmaking process. I remember so vividly that he said it was “like a hand reaching out from the past”—when you find those finger marks, and I’ve done so since on the University of Mississippi campus, as well as at Travellers Rest, it really does bring an emotional reminder of the past. Joe and a local
brickmaker in Holly Springs, Dale DeBerry, were extremely formative in my dissertation research, which looked at the symbolism of Southern soil in early twentieth-century African American literature. How do you see Elizabeth’s mobile app re-investing indigenous sites with similar spirits of these less well known histories, Ece?

**Narration (ET):** The Guide to Indigenous D.C. is a mobile app that is meant as a tour guide, an introduction if you will, to the missing Indigenous narrative in Washington DC. There are 17 locations mapped on the app—one could do all 17 over a 4-hour tour in total. The locations are prominent sites for the history of activism of Indigenous peoples in the US. The first stop is the US Marine Corps War Memorial with the iconic monument of Ira Hayes (Pima Nation) and five other soldiers raising the US flag in Iwo Jima during WW2. The thirteenth place on the tour is the Native American Veterans Memorial, which was not yet built when the app was designed. The app mapped a future location and I find that as something that underlies the work of both Joe and Elizabeth: a correction, an interjection if you will, that puts ignored or unknown places on a map and in so doing changes the future.

Elizabeth is not from the DC area, but due to her advocacy work, she was the Director of The Center for Indigenous Politics and Policy at her previous institution GW University, and in the interview she makes her connections with both the Indigenous people who come to DC for policy and advocacy reasons as well as the Indigenous people who live there very clear. She developed the app to help her Indigenous students—she had them in mind primarily. Most of these students came to DC and felt alienated because they couldn’t see themselves represented there.

**Elizabeth Rule:** But of course, although I'm Indigenous, I'm not Indigenous to the DMV area, but as I came, I really became connected with the diasporic Indigenous community that lives in Washington, DC. So folks like me, right, who come from tribal nations all across the US, including Alaska and Hawaii, who come to the US really in large part to do advocacy work because DC is so central to the decision-making that affects tribal nations and Indigenous communities. So I became very connected and involved with that community, but also with some folks who do call the DC area their traditional ancestral homelands. And so just as I navigated that position myself, I was also working with Indigenous students who were experiencing the same thing that I was. And so I realized, you know, some of my students were feeling maybe out of place or uncomfortable in DC, because they weren’t aware or tapped into those same networks of support that I was in community.
Elizabeth Rule: And so I created the app to really demonstrate first and foremost, to them, to my native students, that DC is an Indigenous place, right. It is Indigenous land and it is an Indigenous place, where they should feel right, welcome, and, and part of a community, and so, you know, that was the original intent, but it has of course expanded beyond that as well. It also serves, like I said, members of the public who maybe have no pre-existing knowledge of any Indigenous subject material who come to DC. There are millions of tourists that come to DC every year. And, you know, I want to make sure that they know about the Indigenous aspects of this city. And I say “aspects” because it includes history as well as things like art, advocacy, activism. And also, like I said, as well, contemporary present and, and future community that calls DC home so really to get to the resources that I drew on to create this, they were varied.

Narration (LW): Not unlike Joe, Elizabeth also places the important locations of Indigenous presence on the DC map and uses that as a way to reclaim DC first and foremost as an Indigenous place.

Elizabeth Rule: I actually took that group of students, that inspirational group of students out to, to do the Guide to Indigenous D.C. And I now incorporate it into my curriculum every time I teach, because I’m based in Washington DC, and, you know, I can just see that again, particularly amongst my native students, their whole orientation to the city seems to change, right. They have said to me that it makes them feel more welcome and more included, and especially prior to the Washington Football Team mascot or name change recently that was, you know, a major sort of negative factor in their experience. And I think that the Guide to Indigenous D.C. they said was, was really sort of a source of strength that countered some of those more racist and down putting experiences that they had.

Elizabeth Rule: The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. You know, in the Apple app store, we have a really high rating. I think it’s 4.7 stars. We have an engagement survey at the end where folks can do a thumbs up or thumbs down. We have a thumbs up to thumbs down ratio of 37 to one. So we see that people are engaging with it and they’re liking it. Users can sign up for our newsletter. We’ve had folks representing 15 different area codes sign up. So that speaks somewhat to the geographical impact. And I can also see through some of our data analysis on the backend that users have downloaded the app from five different countries around the world. So, you know, it’s certainly getting out there. We’re now in the thousands in terms
of downloads and actual specific tours taken and sites interacted with clicks.

Narration (ET): While Elizabeth talks about putting many existing places that relate to Indigenous activism on the app, she also pinpoints places that are yet to come, such as the National Native American Veterans Memorial, which was not finished at the time the app was originally created. It was finished a year and a half after the app was finished in November 2020.

Elizabeth Rule: And I oftentimes have people ask me, you know, users of the app say, you know, why did you pick this particular place to pinpoint on the map? There's nothing there. Right. And that's absolutely true, right? And that's part of my intervention actually is to fill that gap by putting a pinpoint on a map and producing this product where there is otherwise no form of public commemoration of events that went on, there's no plaque, there is no monument, there's no statue. And in some cases, as you said, maybe there are not even many articles or newspaper reports. It's really sort of a memory and a history that exists only in the minds of participants, and so I hope to make my own intervention into that archive, if you will, by putting a pinpoint on a map and producing it in this comprehensive way.

Elizabeth Rule: I've really considered in this mapping project is what it means to map sites that don't yet exist, right? In order to project an Indigenous future, right? Because in the same way that native people have been here and are here, we are also going to be here in the future. So one of the really interesting experiences I had when I created the Guide to Indigenous D.C. was I included a site, the National Native American Veterans Memorial. And I mapped it, right. I put the pinpoint there. And this was at a time when it was about a year and a half before the site actually existed, right. It was projected to be developed. It was mapped. I mapped it. But it didn't actually open until about a year and a half later.

PART 2: The Missing Archives

Narration (LW): Elizabeth’s work maps activism and can be considered an act of activism itself. Joe’s work is too, actively raising this issue, presenting, teaching, and illuminating otherwise missing narratives. In this next clip, Elizabeth talks about some of the limitations she encountered while researching her own work, as well as bringing together the app project.
Elizabeth Rule: Or again, as I said earlier, oftentimes resources are so limited when it comes to Indigenous subject material to a historical context, right. So maybe it was easier to find some historical newspapers but more difficult, really to find anything about more recent, you know, Indigenous activism or Indigenous artists, things of that nature. You know, this is not necessarily related to the archives per se, but one of the things that I've really had to think through with the app is that the map incorporates sites where significant actions have taken place.

Narration (ET): Elizabeth talks about putting missing or ignored places on a map. So in bringing these stories to the front, who else becomes interested? Joe, for example, talked about descendants of slave owners being interested in the Slave Dwelling Project. Let’s hear about that:

Joseph McGill: I noticed that the Slave Dwelling Project appeals a lot to white people who are descendants of slave owners. I, they, you know, they reveal that in the conversations that we have around the campfire, because in this evolution of the Slave Dwelling Project, the conversation that we have around the campfire now has far more substance than, than sleeping. And people know we're coming for that very reason, just for the conversation. Some would have come to have the conversation and leave after the conversation and, you know, go to more comfortable surroundings.

Joseph McGill: You know, folks come, get, kind of, this thing has kind of following if you will, a fan base, you know, people travel great distances to come in and take part in these, in these sleepovers.

Narration (LW): Joe also talked about how the sleepovers in dwellings of the enslaved inevitably bring up conversations about reparations or questions about inheritance.

Joseph McGill: The descendant community of those who are enslaved at the sites where the Slave Dwelling Project were beginning to develop more relationships with organizations that do that and ones that don't, we encourage them to because, you know, when the descendant community is involved, I think the stories at these places are a more rich and there’s some challenges to that, you know, they're, they're those sites that have been doing what they've been doing for so long, the way that they've been doing it is because, you know, they have no desire to reach out to the descendant community because, you know, sometimes that means that, you know, you put yourself out there for that word that scares everyone, you know, reparations.
Joseph McGill: But even further than that, sometimes you put yourself into a situation that it’s, it could be, it could be inheritance because, you know, if you look at the inventory of some of these sites of enslaved people, you will see some of those people listed as mulattoes. And you know, if there were mulattoes, then who fathered these children, who sired these children and, and, and you get, you get away from reparations to an inheritance and that’s, you know, that’s a big concern and they should be a big concern for, for a lot of these sites, but above and beyond that, you know, if you can get beyond all that, it’s the research itself, it’s the knowledge that these descended communities are seeking, you know, they want to know where their ancestors were. They want to know the property where they were held.

Joseph McGill: They want to know that the stories of these enslaved ancestors are being told and told properly at these sites, you know, they want, they are interested in the fact that, you know, we’re breaking away from this, this happy slave benevolent slave owner narrative. Although we break away from it, I mean, it still exists. It still persists. People still go to a plantation seeking back that Gone With the Wind type of narratives. And I think if, you know, if this, if the descendant community is involved in, in what’s disseminated at these places, then you know, that false story or that incomplete story will cease to exist. So, yeah, I think it’s very important that every site associated with that institution of slavery should, you know, involve the descendants today, of those places.

Narration (ET): And then the conversation the two of you had takes a really interesting turn. Without naming it you start talking about Critical Race Theory and the post-George Floyd period we are living in, in the midst of a global pandemic too. Joe’s been having virtual sleepovers with Facebook Live and the Slave Dwelling Conference is also online this year, right?

Narration (LW): Yes, that’s right. Joe had some really pertinent things to say about why this conversation involving hidden histories becomes particularly important in light of the Black Lives Matter Movement. One thing that struck me as someone from the UK, for example, was the way in which the Black Lives Matter protests in the States began to inspire more activist behavior in the UK with the Cecil Rhodes statue and eponymous scholarships at the University of Oxford being called attention to by the Rhodes Must Fall movement, and the statue of Edward Colston, notorious enslaver, being pulled down and thrown into the Bristol Harbor. Yet it still seemed like there was an element of surprise for some British people, a sort of sudden realization of the UK’s complicity in the transatlantic slave trade. I think there’s the tendency to exceptionalize the United States and say, well, race, racism and the legacy of slavery is a purely American
problem. I asked Joe if he could comment on whether any Slave Dwelling Project participants express similar surprise, and also if he had future hopes to take his work transatlantically, to—as I put it—“triangulate the history of the transatlantic slave trade”.

Joseph McGill: **Triangulate, the triangle. Yeah. I'm for that. I'm certainly, I'm certainly for that. You know, I think what George Floyd, George Floyd's death has given us an opportunity to do is well maybe we define or, or in some cases look at colonialism and what it did, what it did to this world and what it did to the diaspora of Africans, uh, you know, bringing them out of Africa. And now of course we can't look at this colonialism. And later on at the lapse of the English, you know before the English were the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the Spanish, the English were, were late to the game, but when they came in, they came in big and of course the United States has evidence of that. So you know, we need to you know, think more globally and in how this all came to be, and George Floyd's death brought us to that place where we started to think more globally about this thing and because of that, you know, we should continue to think more, more globally.

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**PART 3: What’s Next for McGill and Rule**

**Narration (ET):** So alongside thinking more globally, Joe has local plans. He has been invited to Virginia, to do a sleepover at the governor’s mansion there. A note for our listeners that after November 2021 there is going to be a new governor in that mansion. So with the new governor Joe will need to revise his plans!

Joseph McGill: **Hey, but I have been talking to the First Lady [of Virginia]. In fact, at the end of this month, I'll be going to Virginia Governor's mansion and spending a night there. So I've been coordinating that with the First Lady of Virginia.**

**Narration (ET):** Joe also talks about visiting sites near you in Nashville such as Travellers Rest and Belle Meade, the latter of which is considered a Tennessee plantation dynasty. That site pretty much focuses only on the white family history, from what I understand, though, right?

**Narration (LW):** Yes, but there’s always more to that story of course. While the white McGavock family are usually the focus of Belle Meade, it’s actually their confiscated Confederate land that enabled the establishment of Fisk University by the American Missionary Association, after the Civil War. Then of course there’s The Hermitage, famous home of the “Great White Father” Andrew Jackson. Joe’s presence has been
pivotal at The Hermitage, however, as he has conducted recurring sleepovers and helped the site to incorporate the lives of the enslaved into the narrative they now tell to visitors through the “In Their Footsteps” tour.

One last example I discussed with Joe was when I met someone at the 12th South Farmers Market here in Nashville, and they said ”oh you have to see this building right here” which was the Sunnyside Mansion, a home which interestingly stood between Union and Confederate lines during the famous Battle of Nashville. So we go round to the back of the building and there are some smaller dwellings. Then I see a small sign in the building window that says “This Place Matters.” Well that’s the small marker that Joe will sometimes leave at a place after a sleepover and so there the Slave Dwelling Project was, right in the middle of Sevier Park. I felt Joe’s presence there, it was beautiful. I really appreciate him and the work he is doing. And how about your interview with Elizabeth, Ece? What are her future plans?

Narration (ET): The Guide to Indigenous D.C. app was very successful and clearly filled a gap for Indigenous and non-native communities. Elizabeth and her team also built a Guide to Tribal Colleges and Universities, which includes a quarterly journal people can sign up for. She is launching the Android version of the Guide to Indigenous D.C., as well as a new mobile app, the Guide to Indigenous Baltimore, in November 2021. Prof Rule will soon publish two books one on the Indigenous D.C. app the other on Gendered Violence and Indigenous Nationhood:

Elizabeth Rule: I’m really working now to expand and create a larger guide to Indigenous lands project that incorporates a number of different guides, if you will. So different apps, different maps, different guides. So I have already created a Guide to Tribal Colleges and Universities. This is different and distinct in the sense that it’s national in scope, but also the audience is different. This is really designed to be a resource to students who are maybe interested in attending a tribal college or university. I’m also currently working with other community collaborators and scholars and historians to create a Guide to Indigenous Baltimore, so that’s going to be coming out in the coming months.

Narration (LW): What exciting plans for the future—I can’t wait to see how things develop for Elizabeth and Joe. It’s been great to hear, in their own words, the importance of changing the historical narrative and making it more complete. We look forward to continuing to excavate issues like this in our next episode featuring Magana Kabugi, Mellon Fellow at Fisk University, and Holly Smith, head archivist at Spelman College, Atlanta.
Narration (ET): That was our guests Joseph McGill from the Slave Dwelling Project and Elizabeth Rule, the Indigenous creator of the Guide to Indigenous D.C. mobile app. You can listen to Joe and Elizabeth’s interviews and learn about their work on our website.

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