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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello. Welcome to the CARC podcast. The Career in Academic Resource Center Podcast. I am Chris Davis, the Associate Director of CARC, here at the Harvard Division of a continuing education. And it is my great pleasure to have with me today a transatlantic guest. Deirdre Mask is a London-based attorney, a writer and an academic. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Economist Lit Hub*, *The Harvard Law Review*, *The Dublin Review*, and *Irish Pages*. She is the author of *The Address Book* published by *St Martin's Press* in 2020. And she also teaches writing a nonfiction book and advanced creative nonfiction here at Harvard Extension School. Deirdre, thank you so much for being here tonight. Do we say today but tonight.

DEIRDRE MASK: It's tonight for me. I'm delighted. Thank you so much for inviting me.

CHRIS DAVIS: So yeah, I wanted to talk a good deal about your book and also your teaching.

DEIRDRE MASK: Yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I was trying to think about how best to summarize *The Address Book*. When I first came across the book, I feel like the summary that I read didn't really do justice to what the book turned out to be. I read a lot of academic scholarly writing. A lot of it really doesn't jump off the page, but *The Address Book* is just such an interesting, remarkable book. And there's so much history in it and yet it is so lively and entertaining.

So you cover everything from communities and you know nations that have been up until recently, very poorly represented I guess, or in terms of how addresses function, whether street addresses are existing, where for who, you talk about West Virginia, you talk about India, to talking about the outbreak of cholera in the 1850s in London and also the cholera epidemic in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake.

You talk about the evolution of early street names in London, the creation of the Royal Mail, Postal Reform, the Penny Post, to Letter Detectives, to the creation of ZIP codes in the United States to Empress Maria Teresa and Vienna and her conscription of souls and in the late 1700s how houses were numbered. In Austria so that people could be conscripted into the army, to talking about street names are named after revolutionary figures across the globe, in Iran talking about Bobby Sands streets and a number of countries. I mean, there's so much in this book. Can you tell us a little bit about the genesis of it. How it started and what it came to mean for you.

DEIRDRE MASK: Yeah. Thanks so much first for the compliment that it's lively because when you tell people you're writing a book about street addresses, you know, and not just street names but also the history of house numbering, people tend to back away and think it's very dull. So and I think it's not that dull. I'm always glad to hear from readers who don't because it really isn't. Yeah the genesis of the book was basically. There was a time in which I was really living in Ireland at the time for a year. So I have a long Harvard background. I first came to Harvard Summer School when I was a high-schooler. Then I went to Harvard College and Harvard Law School. I've taught an Extension and I've taken classes and Extension.

So Harvard was always on my mind but this was the year that I was living in Ireland. And I was mailing a letter back to my dad for his birthday, I still remember it. And I just got one of those sort of procrastination, Google hunts, where I was trying to work out how the money gets divided between Ireland and the US for delivering this mail. And I came across this organization that's called the Universal Postal Union, which is the second oldest UN organization and I often say it sounds like it was purposely named to be way more boring than it is because it's actually really fascinating because the fascinating job of organizing the world's mail.

And on the site, I came across a statistic that millions and probably billions of people around the world don't have addresses, street addresses or at least now addresses that we think of. And then the more I read into this, the more I learned that there were places in the US that didn't have street addresses. And at that time that included parts of rural West Virginia, and not coincidentally really the poorest parts of West Virginia. And so I ended up writing an article for *The Atlantic* about a project to give streets names and houses numbered in West Virginia. And at first it seems sort of quirky. I mean it was quite funny to be honest the way people would go about naming street names.

I remember talking to one coordinator who would have a secretary lookup scrabble websites to see how they could find short words that would fit on street signs. And there was a street that somebody named cougar lane after apparently what was called a pretty hot lady who lived on the street. I mean, it was all a bit ridiculous, to be honest. But actually the more I was there and the more I talked to people, the more I realized there was a much deeper story here. Not only the people without addresses are often those who are the poorest and they aren't counted or they don't receive mail.

But also there's something more complicated going on in West Virginia and that there would be people there who didn't want these street addresses. And this would be described to me as, they're just big quotes ignorant or big quotes hicks. And I just didn't think this was true. And so the more I looked into the history of street addressing, the more I saw that we think of street addresses as a way for us to get around as a convenience for us as a way for us to get. I know packages have been piling up on my doorstep during this pandemic.

But really, they were designed to find you. It's the state really wants to find you so that they can tax you, and draft you, and police you, arrest you, find you in an emergency, all sorts of reasons. And so people who didn't want them they kind of understood what a lot of 18th century Europeans went when house numbering came into effect. They also understood that this was changing something that they could now be found. And this sort of launched off on a much bigger project of trying to discover what we can reveal when we look at the world through the lens of street addresses.

CHRIS DAVIS: First of all, I have to say you have traveled to most, if not all, of these locations. And have seen on the ground with your eyes a lot of what you're describing and some of the resistance that you describe in West Virginia does have a parallel to-- I think one of the writers that you quoted who said after house numbering had started to become more common in Eastern Central Europe and there were people who destroyed their own house numbers because they felt destroying their house numbers was for the powerless akin to taking back their humanity. The fact that there seem to be a perception of government control or something unwelcome about the idea of having their houses numbered.

DEIRDRE MASK: Yeah. And it sounds kind of bizarre but actually, when you think about it, it makes perfect sense. If you don't have an address, if you don't have a way of identifying who you are and who lives there, you can be fairly anonymous. You know you're shielded. You're shielded by your home, and obviously your local community can find you but it's actually really hard for outsiders to find you.

And for the most part, people didn't have very unique names, it was actually quite hard for people to find you. And so only people who really needed to find you or you wanted to find you could. And so this idea that everybody was going to have a number and they were going to be registered. Obviously it wasn't the first census, but it was this idea that there'd be a permanent way for people to find you particularly in this instance I talk about in Hapsburg Empire was really for drafting you, or the later taxing you. There was this feeling that yeah, you did not want to be marked with the number, and numbers are also essentially dehumanizing, we know that. So there was this sense that something was changing when they slapped a number on their door.

CHRIS DAVIS: You also talk about and I want to make sure I pronounce this correctly, the city in India formerly known as Kolkata, which is now referred to as Kolkata.

DEIRDRE MASK: That's how I say it. Yes. Somebody else can correct me but I tend to say Kolkata. Yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah. And you talk about this mobilization, this effort to buy a lot of volunteers. It sounds like to ensure that slum areas of Kolkata have most in the past, it seems like they were not, there was no system of numbering. I mean not only numbering houses, but you talk in great detail about how the logistics of what that looks like when you know sometimes someone's domicile, someone's houses, part of a room. So the complexity of that and also you talk about inclusion is one of those street weapons of the secret weapons of street addresses. Talking about why these volunteers have kind of mobilized to ensure that kind of everyone is counted and everyone has an address because there is something important about having that identification. Having that which can be considered a human right.

DEIRDRE MASK: Yeah. Exactly. Yes, I went to Kolkata because there's this really a non-profit that was basically they were going to give addresses to all the slums and I was intrigued because when you think of Kolkata, you think of the needs of the slums addresses are not what you think of. But without an address, it's actually really hard to do a lot of modern life. I mean if you think about your own life, your bank account sending your kids to school, getting passports, voting. All these sorts of things it's kind of essential to have an address.

So there were the main parts of the city of Kolkata, a lot of them have addresses though it's not great addressing. It's not systematic as we tend to think of in places like the US and the UK. But the slums in general, and for the most part talking about squatter slums. So they aren't necessarily legitimate slums that many have been there for many, many, many years did not have addresses. And so there's a problem with that. First of all it sort of excludes people from modern life and also it kind of makes them amorphous. You don't see people when you can't count them, or you can't-- And so this is actually one of the reasons why the World Bank is called street addressing just a really cheap way of helping to pull people out of poverty because really for pennies per person you can access them to all of this sort of aspects of modern life. And exactly as you said it was hard for me to imagine it.

I went to many of these slums over my time in India and yeah, we really impose our own for somebody like me who's lived my whole life and in the US and now in the UK. We have these idea of these straight narrow streets and these single family homes or apartment buildings where I live, but it doesn't work like that, right. It can't really call them as streets or alleys or dead ends. It doesn't quite work like that. So this organization was trying to think of really clever ways of doing this without resorting to sort of the traditional ways we think of. Also street names are really controversial, so you don't want to have to go through a process of naming all the streets. But the point about conclusion is a really important one as well.

And I understood this and again the World Bank experts have written about how good it feels that you can be found by other people. And I actually already knew this because one of the very earliest interviews I ever did was with a South African voting official who is Black, and he told me this funny story that he lived in sort of a rural area and he had a cousin who lived in the city who had an address and he thought that was very glamorous. And I laughed but it's so exactly what he meant that this was somebody who he was counted, he could get mail, he was a real person in the world.

And so, in Kolkata, I felt there was that sense there too because bank accounts were very useful for many but there are some that this is not going to be useful. And this happened, there was one instance in particular where we were in one slum that was sort of near this port and a woman came to find the team I was following to get an address. And I think her home was probably the poorest one I was quite close to it. So I hadn't seen as many up close.

You know, there's barely any roof there was somebody actually sleeping under the bed not just on top of the bed. It was very, very poor household. And she really wanted one. And I realized she just wanted to be included. She wanted to be just like everybody else. Just like all the other people in her community. She wanted to be seen. And so she wanted one as well, because I don't think the bank account at least at this point in her life was going to be that useful for her. So just this aspect of not having an address is really surprising thing for me and really helped to fuel sort of the rest of the book as well, when I start to look at places that actually do have addresses.

CHRIS DAVIS: Now going beyond simply tracking where people live, there are other related aspects that you cover. As I mentioned earlier, there's a chapter in the book that's devoted to the cholera outbreaks that came after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 and also the big original cholera outbreak in the 1850s and how Jon Snow, not that Jon Snow but the--

DEIRDRE MASK:Not the Jon Snow very important.

CHRIS DAVIS: Easily confused these days but power. Yeah. You talk about how in Soho which was extremely densely populated part of London at that time, which really bears little relation to what it is now, nowadays. You know how Jon Snow kind of largely unheralded at the time created this system of tracking where the cholera outbreaks originated down to the specific homes to track where this communicable disease was coming from because they're really-- that was not confirmed at all at that time. I mean also relating it to similar efforts in Haiti and as you describe as recently as 2010, there were large parts of Haiti that were very poorly addressed if that can be a term. Your book was published in April 2020 and I'm sure years of research went into it. But how did you feel and you talk about how at the end of that chapter you kind of fear for the team of epidemiologists who had the job of tracking these kind of big outbreaks, but how did you feel having done this research and talked about the first global epidemic, which was the cholera outbreak of the 1850s.

DEIRDRE MASK: Yeah. It's a great question. The cholera chapter really came out of this just something I'd learned, which is basically that Jon Snow as you described this sort of in the first epidemiologist, what he did in Victoria in London, in terms of helping to track down cholera, was just impossible after a cholera outbreak in 2010 in Haiti, which as you point out is largely not addressed but also isn't even mapped. I mean there are parts of it that aren't even properly mapped. And so it engages in this question of disease tracking and the importance of addresses and registration and public records and all of these things disease tracking.

So it was really interesting because the book had been done and dusted for a couple of months, I'd say at least before COVID hit. So it was really interesting following it. You know because you do have these patterns of location, just the book really emphasizes how much location and disease are. And we saw that so much with COVID and these where I am in the UK. We had very specific lockdown orders that were sometimes based on ZIP codes or council borders. We were always looking at maps. We were tracking people.

And interestingly, shortly after the first lockdown here in the UK, I wrote an article for The Financial Times that was about this issue and I looked at the time where Singapore had done extremely well. I haven't checked on them recently, but I knew they had done extremely well in containing the virus, which made a lot of sense according to some of the principles of my chapter because it's a high surveillance state. They have very easy ways of tracking down people and finding where they were. And so they had very strict quarantine orders, of all sorts of ways. Somebody would turn up at your door and things like that.

But one thing I thought also sort of proves the point was that at the time when I was writing the article, they had had these break, the big flare ups of COVID were in these migrant dormitories which these foreign workers coming to Singapore there with these migrant dormitories, which again are different. They're sort of outside, I think maybe in some sense, the lens of what you think of as this sort of Singapore surveillance state these large migrant dormitories and I was talking to my husband about this and I was saying, there's something really interesting here that this is where it happens. It connected as location disease.

And he quoted me something that American judges often say in another context as he said, "When you look into a crowded room, you only see your friends." Which I thought was really an interesting way of thinking about something that happened at least in Singapore that when they were looking out and seeing what they saw, they weren't necessarily seeing these more marginalized people.

But you know, it has been really interesting seeing disease tracking, but it also shows that you don't just need the address and location, you need the political and public health will to actually track. This for example here where I write in UK, the test and trace even though it's very highly mapped, very highly surveilled, was a disaster because there wasn't the political will and the ability to do it properly. So I think one thing I learned was that it wasn't just that Jon Snow was able to find people, but he also had the will to make this happen. And I think that's something that a lot of countries at least in the UK and much of the US really failed.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I wanted to ask you a good part of the book is devoted to I guess what could be deemed more controversial examples of naming the street naming, naming conventions. It was fascinating to read about Germany. I guess you could say nazification, de-nazification and then post-cold war, where you talk about East Germany kind of being a confusing model of I think you quoted some one person who kind of referred to it as a corporate takeover in terms of names being changed from let's say controversial figures to very kind of generic names and how people communicating with each other in the same city in the same country oftentimes had to kind of do the mental gymnastics in their head of converting something to an old name to a very, very old name so that memories that people shared with each other people knew what they were talking about.

And you also talk about something which is still incredibly relevant in terms of more locally Confederate street names in various towns, cities, and states across the country, and how the urban people kind of fighting to undo that for many years. There appears to be some more traction in the last few years in terms of that. They do the wonderful example of Hollywood, Florida how that community originated and how one very persistent citizen had tried for years to get some of these Confederate street names in Black neighborhoods, that were very clearly by design named or re-named after Confederate figures. Can you talk a little bit about that, about how have you seen any kind of evolution since you started with the idea of the book, what you think of the Post-Trump era will look like in terms of these conversations.

DEIRDRE MASK: So I think a lot of those chapters describe. Obviously there's the Berlin chapter, which was very interesting for me because it started off basically on the work I was reading about how the Nazis changed names. This was one of, the Nazis were all about propaganda and what better propaganda is the street name. You have to use it. It changes the streetscape. It changes your sense of the place. But I was intrigued that the more I read about it, the more I saw was a post-cold war story that you had to translate your experience across the street names and it was all ideological street names. It wasn't just changing it from Pine Street to Oak Street because there was also a pin street that sounded the same to change. I mean, these were all ideological changes.

But the race chapters were really interesting to me. There's a chapter on streets named after Martin Luther King, that was written over the course of a few years as I tracked a project that was designed to sort of revitalize streets named after Martin Luther King. And then there was the Hollywood, Florida chapter, which you described, which is exactly these at least traditionally Black neighborhoods have been given these Confederate street names. So for the most part of the book, I tend to be a bit journalistic and reporter. I mean I think a lot of times my personal opinion does come out.

But I try really hard to describe. I mean I am black myself. I couldn't particularly be neutral about Confederate street names and I'm not. At the same time, I found it interesting when I was studying it to see that this really isn't just about the street name. When you watch the debates about this, it really was about the conception of what the civil war meant. And it was fascinating to me that in a council meeting in this day and age, what people were really debating about is the civil war. I mean this is just this became a way for people to talk about what the civil war meant, what these generals meant and the sort of live in a way that I thought was really unusual.

And it also revealed people's attachments to just name so there would also be people who lived on Lee street, who'd say I don't care anything about Robert E. Lee, but I met my husband on Lee street, you know, or I got married on Lee street, I brought my baby home from the hospital on Lee street. I just like Lee street and that's the name. just that attached to the name and I thought that was sincere though I think nostalgia isn't a very good reason to keep what I deem a racist name. But I think it adds a lot of depth to this conversation about what people were really talking about when they talked about street names and how a lot of people felt it really felt the need to try to pull a positive spin on their family's experience of the civil war, for example. So it's actually a lot more complicated than it looked at least on the surface.

But-- and Post-Trump, actually, it's been really interesting again. It was really interesting to have written this book you know and then right after that was the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests and most obviously you know Black Lives Matter Plaza outside of the White House, which I wrote an article in The Atlantic about. Partly because one of the interesting thing about the new Black Lives Matter Plaza is that they're in very central locations. You know that one's symbolically right outside the White House but this is same for honoring streets in New York after Black Lives Matter Plaza and all over the country and tradition the history of Martin Luther King Junior streets which you could arguably say we're doing the same thing. They were often tucked away in Black neighborhoods or marginalized neighborhoods. Not always, but a lot of times that was their history. So I thought it was interesting that they were putting these front and center.

In the argument I was making in that particular article was that there were people who were involved in the Black Lives Matter movement who was saying you know what's the point of these street names. It's just the word they would use was performative. I completely understand that argument, though in a sense I disagree with it partly because I write about street names and I think they're valuable. So I have an inherent interest. But no because the history of revolution for example, is so tied up in street names.

When the new regime comes over, often the street names are changed. It's just something that's tracked again and again throughout history. And I spoke to one academic who described it to me one way that I actually quite liked, which is that the changing of street names and revolutions is actually particularly important because if you have an invading army, the invading army can come in and they occupy. And it's very obvious this invading army is there. When you have a revolution it's not so clear, things look the same.

So rather than take the space from the outside, you have to take the space from the inside. And taking the space from the inside basically just means re-branding. So I'm not saying this is a revolution but in the sense it has that same revolutionary spirit of trying to enact huge social change. I actually thought that renaming the streets was a positive step and maybe even a necessary step to show something behind it. Now it's just renaming the streets alone going to change anything. No I don't agree with that. But I do think they do have a lot of importance and symbolic importance in the movement.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, you also talk about that in the chapter that you wrote on MLK streets throughout the nation. You at length talk about St Louis and I think you referred to the perception of Martin Luther King Drive street Boulevard et cetera, et cetera. Kind of being widely perceived as a bad address, regardless of other factors, parks, storefronts, efforts at improvements. There's a perception that seems to permeate those streets, those addresses throughout the country.

DEIRDRE MASK: Exactly. Because, I mean, I grew up with Chris Rock, and there's that joke he has find yourself on Martin Luther King Jr. street run. Because there's this perception that they were terrible dangerous places, I laughed too at the time. But the more I read about it first of all, there's a history behind it. There's a reason why this is true of some Martin Luther King Jr. Street and it can, in the case of St Louis, it's a straight line from racism and segregation and housing policy, I mean to what Martin Luther King Jr. Street in St. Louis has become, which is really derelict. But it's not true of all Martin Luther King Jr streets and there are a lot of them who are in quite fancy areas and there's movements to revitalize the ones who are struggling.

But I got that same point. It sort of made me think like what are we doing here and that king wouldn't be embarrassed about poverty. I think he associated himself very strongly with the most marginalized citizens so some was it seen as a triumph that an MLK street is in a prominent shopping area because it's defying the stereotype. But I think it's maybe undermining a little bit about what king represented. He wasn't every day who drive kind of leader you know that was what he was going for. And also if you look at a lot of evidence about MLK streets, some researchers is a fascinating study where they found that MLK streets they compared them to main streets and JFK streets.

And they found that they actually weren't that much economically worse off. They were just different. They had different kinds of shops and lots of reasons for that also tracing to segregation, for example fewer lawyer shops, fewer lawyer shops, sorry. Fewer lawyers offices and more churches because Black white collar jobs were in where in the church or in schools rather than in legal jobs that they had no access to. But I really started to think maybe this stereotype persists partly because MLK streets were so in our minds with black streets. And people have been so long taught to associate Blackness with badness that they now have branded MLK streets all with this brush that they are dilapidated. Now I can't prove it but that's my own theory.

CHRIS DAVIS: I wanted to close out by talking about or asking about you teach nonfiction writing. Obviously this is a piece of nonfiction writing. What is your philosophy in terms of how you approach teaching nonfiction writing for your students

DEIRDRE MASK: And I should point out I've taught so many classes in the college and at Extension including academic writing and nonfiction writing is one of my favorites, that's what I'm teaching at the minute. But yeah, I knew my perch is really, what I was telling my nonfiction students and this is I'm not the first person to say this is that there's an idea that the story is about something, but it's really about something else. And if you take any great piece of nonfiction I think that's true. And I tried really hard to do it in my book.

And in fact, the whole book you could say that the whole book is that the book is about street addresses. It's very much about street addresses. But it's really about power. It's really about identity. It's really about a race. But it's really a way of talking about something else. And so you may have a story about, it may be a personal essay about yourself and your relationship with your mother but really it's about trying to cross the boundaries of an immigrant parent and an American born child. Like this things like this often come up. These things we write about are really about something larger and often deeper and often things that connect us as humans. So when people say that they're nonfiction writing isn't quite working, sometimes it's because they haven't found what they're really writing about even though they think they're writing about something else.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, on that note, I am going to repeat that. I hope people read the book because it's truly is. Even in the threads of what we talked about, I don't know if we fully did justice to it. It's just such a dynamic. There are history lessons in it. There's also, as you said, there are broader things, very contemporary things, that are certainly relevant and dynamic but all of it was just very, very entertaining and provocative and interesting and I'm so happy to have had the opportunity to talk to you today.

DEIRDRE MASK: Oh, my gosh. Thank you so much to huge compliment and I'm honored to be asked so thank you so much.

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the CARC podcast. This is the podcast for the career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School and I hope you will join us again.

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