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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello. Welcome to the Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast. I am your host, Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School.

Today, it is my great pleasure to have with me Jonathan Square. And we're going to be talking about a few things, but just to introduce him a little bit, Jonathan is a writer, historian, and curator of Afro diasporic fashion and visual culture. He holds a PhD in history from New York University and is currently a faculty member teaching history and literature at Harvard University.

He currently teaches two courses at Harvard Extension School, Black Visuality in the Digital Age and Take Back the Museum, which he'll be teaching in spring 2021. And he is at work on a book project that is tentatively titled *Negro Cloth-- How Slavery Built the Global Fashion Industry*. Jonathan, thank you so much for being here with me today.

JONATHAN SQUARE: Oh, it's an honor and a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I thought we would start off, if you could tell us a little bit about your background, the research that you are doing.

JONATHAN SQUARE: Yeah. I mean, this is my fourth year teaching at Harvard, believe it or not. And as you mentioned, I'm teaching a class called Black Visuality in the Digital Age. And next semester, I'll be teaching a new class, my first time teaching it actually, called Take Back the Museum.

And my training is I'm a historian of slavery. And I was born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And my family has long-- has had roots in that state. So I'm a descendant of enslaved people. And the experience of enslaved people has always been an academic interest for me, but it's also a personal interest as well, given my heritage.

So throughout my childhood, in college, in grad school, I focused on the history of slavery in the Americas. But I'm also in an aesthete. I'm a creative person. And it wasn't until midway through the process of doing a PhD that I start uniting my training as a historian of slavery with my love of creative expression. And that's the genesis of my career now.

I launched a digital humanities project called Fashioning the Self in Slavery and Freedom, which that was primarily on social media. There's an Instagram page. There's a Facebook page. There's even a YouTube page. But it's also sort of branched out into other things.

I've done a few events under the umbrella of Fashioning the Self in Slavery and Freedom. And also, I've put out two magazines of the same name. So that's become my little laboratory, my little individual think tank.

And yeah, it reflects my pedagogy as well, like the courses that I've taught at Harvard. I've taught a class on fashion and slavery, which is my primary research area, which I'm sure we'll delve into further in the conversation. I taught a class on Black beauty culture, which is exactly what the-- hair, makeup, modeling, fashion within Black communities.

And I teach this class right now on Black Visuality in the Digital Age which is very 21st century about memes, and going viral, and YouTube blogging, vlogging, and all that stuff and teaching a new class. I've also taught a class-- I co-taught a class how museums and material culture which is a class that was based around a number of guest speakers and site visits to cultural institutions in the greater Boston area. And then I'm teaching the class in the spring, as you mentioned, called Take Back the Museum which is about curatorial justice and thinking critically about museum spaces.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the book you're working on and also elaborate a little bit. Because I think it's quite fascinating. I mean, your research, a little bit in that area and also what the focus of your forthcoming book will be.

JONATHAN SQUARE: Absolutely. So in the book, I hope to get at the experience of enslaved people through the lens of fashion. And each chapter, in many ways, will stand alone. But they'll also be in conversation with each other.

For example, there's a chapter on the clothing company Brooks Brothers and its connection to slavery. But what I really try to do in that chapter is get at the experience of the enslaved people who wore Brooks Brothers clothing. I mean, people don't realize that Brooks Brothers actually manufactured clothing for enslavers. And sometimes, the clothing that they manufactured ended up on the backs of elite white men in New York City and the rest of the Northeast.

But they made a variety of clothing, not just for expensive suiting for elite men, but also livery, which was made for domestics. And in the context of the 19th century, many of those domestics were enslaved people. So there's a chapter that's unpacking that history. And I really attempt to get at the experience of the enslaved people who wore those jackets, those Brooks Brothers coats that are the focus of that chapter.

I have another chapter on head wraps, and free and enslaved women of color in New Orleans, and unpacking the history of head wraps and how they might have to use head wraps to express their multifarious identities but also as a way to fight for more freedom. So there's another chapter on W.E.B Du Bois and his self-fashioning. A lot of scholars have done work on Frederick Douglass and how he sort of willed photography and he crafted a public persona using his own image.

I'm interested in W.E.B Du Bois, because he's from a later generation. And I think he engaged with fashion and image crafting in different and interesting ways. So there's a chapter on W.E.B Du Bois.

So that's the book in a nutshell. And it's an outgrowth of the work that I've been doing for the past five or six years, which is on fashion and slavery, whether it's in my teaching to my pedagogy, through my digital humanities project, through my sort of work as a nascent public intellectual. The book project is an outgrowth of my larger intellectual self.

CHRIS DAVIS: And approximately how far into it are you? I know that writing a book and a project like this is a very iterative process. And sometimes it can germinate for a long time until it's ready. But more or less, where do you think-- how much more work do you have to do, do you think?

JONATHAN SQUARE: I have a few chapters finished. But don't-- the book won't be out next year.

[LAUGHTER]

It's going to be out in a few years from now. The book writing process, as you just described, is very laborious. And once it's out there it's out there, so I want to make sure whatever I produce is rigorous, and everything is up to speed. So I'm still very-- it's in a manuscript form now. But I'm still very early in the manuscript form.

CHRIS DAVIS: Mm-hmm. So I was wondering, can you talk a little bit about-- I think this is this semester the second Harvard Extension School student who is working as a faculty aide for you. And just to give a little-- take a little step back, one of the things that I've tried to do in this podcast and, hopefully, we'll be doing more and more of is spotlighting some of the work that students and instructors, faculty are doing as part of this program.

So I believe, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I think a student worked with you on the Fashioning the Self project before. Was that correct? Yes, OK.

JONATHAN SQUARE: Exactly.

CHRIS DAVIS: And so the student who is currently working with you or doing research for you, are they working strictly on background material for the book? Or is it some other part of your work?

JONATHAN SQUARE: They're working on the Fashioning the Self project again. Yeah. So well, first off, I just want to say that I love Extension School students. I love Harvard students in general. Everyone who goes to Harvard is great.

But Extension School students, I feel like they bring a certain level of life experience to the classroom and often life experiences that I haven't had. I have students who have served in the military. I have students who have full sort of flourishing careers as filmmakers, and they end up teaching me. It becomes a very collaborative environment.

And it's very different than teaching in the college, where you're often teaching 17, 18, 19-year-olds, who are great, and very intelligent, and passionate about what they're doing. But they're very young. So they just don't have that life experience. So it's just a very rewarding experience interacting with Extension School students.

And also, I find that I maintain relationships with my Extension School students. For example, I had a student last fall who runs a film festival at Princeton. And this year, so in a few months ago, he asked me to be a jury member on the film festival that he runs. So it becomes more collaborative in a way.

So I really enjoy teaching in Extension School. It's just-- it's fun for me, and hopefully, the students get as much out of it as I get out of it. So but yeah, and also the faculty aid program is amazing.

So the first time I participated in it, I was paired with a student named Mary Soon and completely different field. She's a med student and a poet. And yeah, she worked on my project, Fashioning the Self in Slavery and Freedom. And she, essentially, was an editorial assistant. She even is on the masthead for the magazine, which you can see. The second--

CHRIS DAVIS: Oh, wow.

JONATHAN SQUARE: Yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah.

**JONATHAN
SQUARE:**

So she started as an editorial assistant on the magazine. And so I really benefited from the fact that, one, she's a wordsmith. She just likes language, but also, she's coming from a different field. Primarily, she's a med student.

Actually, she's been very active in fighting COVID in New York City. That's what she's been doing since working on Fashioning the Self. But yeah, coming from a different field, having different life experiences, she just brought a different perspective. Things that make sense to me didn't make sense to her.

And so she was a great editor for that reason. Because there are things that would have like-- I wouldn't have caught that she caught. So that was a really rewarding experience working with her.

And I'm currently working with another faculty aide. And again, different life experiences, different professional background, her name is Angela Carl. But it's been a complete pleasure working with her.

She's currently in the process of organizing an event for me. She was born and raised in the US, but she's also spent a lot of time in Italy and is fluent in Italian. So she's organizing an event for me in Italy, virtually, through Polimoda, which is a fashion school in Florence. So it's been great working with Angela.

And I feel like the Extension School was ready for the pandemic. Other schools were scrambling like, how we're going to do this? What are we going to do? But the Extension School was ready. And because I had already taught in Extension School remotely, I was ready too.

So I mean, I feel like you're still able to have those sort of robust intellectual conversations, even remotely. And also, you're still able to make connections with other students remotely. I have students that I taught last fall that I'm still in contact with, and we've never met in-person.

CHRIS DAVIS:

Can you talk a little bit about that? But because I'm always curious. I have had a couple of instructors on the podcast. And their backgrounds are-- everyone is very different, and the subject matter is very different too.

But I'm always curious, and I definitely want to ask since I have you. Can you tell a little bit about what your experience teaching online has been? It sounds like you have taught a live web conference. Is that correct?

**JONATHAN
SQUARE:**

Yes.

CHRIS DAVIS:

OK. So what's that experience like? How do you-- the online discussion component of it, the live web conference component of it. How has that impacted your teaching? What's that been like so far?

**JONATHAN
SQUARE:**

Yeah. I mean, I think the students make the class. My courses are very discussion-based. So I mean, with Extension students, they always come prepared to have a robust conversation based on the assigned readings.

I'm pretty informal about it. I know some professors have very cordoned off time in which they have discussions, or they use the breakout rooms to separate students. But I really, normally in my classes, the way they're structured is I have a short lecture. That's normally 10, 15, 20, 25 minutes the most.

And then the rest of the class is devoted to just free flowing conversation and also prepared discussion questions after the lecture. Because sometimes it's hard. The students have been listening to me talk for 20 or so minutes. And it's hard to kick off the conversation soft and have a list of discussion questions as a point of departure for the conversation.

And also, one thing that I find is that different students communicate in different ways. So there are some students who just jump into the conversation. Sometimes, they even ask questions in the middle of the lecture, which I think is great. There's other students who are a little shy, or shy, or not shy but just prefer to speak at different times. And they use the chat function, which I also think is great.

I also wish that professors would use the chat function more. For instance, I feel like a lot of professors sort of think of the chat as the unregulated space for students to have their own conversation. And they don't really pay attention to them.

But I also think it's a way to have an icebreaker at the beginning of class. So if someone logs in late, they can see the initial questions that I set up at the beginning of class and join in the conversation even if they were five or 10 minutes late and missed the first part of class. So I also would encourage educators to make use of the chat function.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's interesting to hear you say that, because I think most instructors have a very different approach to that. One of the instructors who I had had on the podcast last year, Dr. Gibaldi, who teaches organizational behavior and management courses. I know that he uses the chat function as a way to-- he kind of does both.

I think he lets students use it as a medium during the class discussion for ideas to be shared or for people to be caught up, as you said, or for a freer flowing conversation. But he monitors it, and if he sees a point being brought up in the chat that someone didn't ask or that relates to the conversation or adds to it, he'll bring that in. And he'll mention it, and he'll say, what do you-- what does everyone think about this?

So that's one approach, but I think you're right. I think, probably, a lot of instructors just use it as-- or don't use it. And there's definitely more dynamic ways to think of that. So yeah.

JONATHAN SQUARE: I also use it if there's a lull in the conversation. It's like, well, let's see what's going on in the chat. I've noticed that chat is firing up, and sort of go to that. It's like breaking-- thankfully, I don't have that problem in my Extension classes. Normally, my students are talking too much.

[LAUGHTER]

But sometimes, I will go to the chat to bring out points that hadn't been brought up yet. One thing that I want to do next semester-- and I've never done this before, so we'll see how this goes. But I want to-- it's going to be, of course, be virtual.

I want to go to museums and teach the class from the museum, virtually, and give them a walkthrough of exhibitions, virtually. Because of course, we can't-- there can't be any site visits. But I can go to the site myself and do a walkthrough of exhibitions and then have the class in the museum space. So that's something I'm going to try to do.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's interesting. And that's your new course, Take Back the Museum?

JONATHAN SQUARE: Exactly, yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, Jonathan, I want to say, thank you so much for taking the time to chat.

JONATHAN SQUARE: Yeah. Thank you for having me on this podcast. And if anyone has any questions about me, or my work, or my pedagogy, feel free to reach out to me. My email is jsquare@fas.harvard.edu.

CHRIS DAVIS: Jonathan, thank you so much. I'll link to your site in the description for this. And I'll also stay tuned for-- I know it's a little ways away, but I'm very excited to see what the final result of your book is. And I'll look forward to that. So thank you so much for joining us today.

JONATHAN SQUARE: Oh, thank you for having me. It's been fun.

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