

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Joining us today is Elvis Bakaitis, who is the interim Head of Reference at The Graduate Center's Mina Rees Library. They serve on the University LGBTQ council. They are a member of the board of The Center for LGBTQ Studies, known as CLAGS at The Graduate Center, and is the library liaison to women's and gender studies also at The GC. Elvis is the author and illustrator of Homos in Herstory, along running Zine Series and co-founder of the New York City Feminist Zine fest. They hold a master's in library science from Queens College, and a certificate in geriatric care management from the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging at Hunter College. Queer librarianship has a great tradition within the library community, so it is appropriate to host Elvis, a key member of the Graduate Center librarian staff during pride month. Welcome to The Thought Project, Elvis Bakaitis, and happy pride.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Thank you so much, Tanya. Thank you for having me, really happy to be here.

Tanya Domi:

So, I'm delighted to have you. This is somewhat delayed because of the pandemic, but better late than never, and it comes at a fortuitous moment. This is pride month, and your work in the area of queer librarianship is to be admired, and you've been doing a lot of it throughout your career. So, Elvis congratulations on several grants that you received in 2020.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Thank you so much, happy pride as well. Yeah, I was really excited. They came at a funny time because of course in March, everything shut down, but it was still very exciting to receive these and be able to do this work.

Tanya Domi:

So, let's start with the Carnegie-Whitney Grant, which came from the American Library Association for the project on lesbian aging studies, a theoretical and cross-cultural approach. What kind of work are you doing and have done on this project?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Thank you. It's a great project. I'm really excited just to be able to explore aging studies a bit more. I was a caretaker for my grandmother, Sylvia, until she was 102 years old. So, I really know the importance of not only respecting elders in the abstract, but really just including people and see how that plays out in a real life context in our world. So for me there's a lot of ageism out there, and this project really focuses on queer aging and saying, "Hey, queer people, the whole population is getting a lot older," and how do we create structures that really reflect the world we want to live in as older adults? So, just looking at the many different ways people have thought about [inaudible 00:03:24] projects, such as older lesbians organizing for change. There's a black lesbian organization for older adults.

Elvis Bakaitis:

There's a lot of like organizations that have been founded to kind of address those issues. I think people don't always know about them, so really just raising awareness.

Tanya Domi:

SAGE is a significant organization in that area.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah, and they've become very well known. So I think they're the name that people know about.

Tanya Domi:

True.

Elvis Bakaitis:

And SAGE is really great, but they also have a somewhat corporate structure, so I like to focus on, who were the people really bringing this to the forefront in the earlier years? People like Barbara McDonalds were in the eighties saying, "Hey, women's studies as a field, you have to look at older lesbians, older women who are in every aspect of women's studies."

Tanya Domi:

Of course, you're recovering history here. A lot of people don't know about this history.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Precisely. It tends to be very invisible on multiple cultural levels, and we want to change that. So, that's the purpose of this project, is really creating a resource that people can use and go to and say, "Hey, I do want to read more about this. Where can I kind of see what's been done on this? Where can I kind of see the landscape of that?"

Tanya Domi:

So are you curating resources around this topic specifically?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah, so the final product will be basically a bibliography that's a guided bibliography. I think people hear that word and they're like, "oh no, that's just for librarians." But I'm really thinking of something that people can go to on a website just to get resources on the theoretical and academic level, but also just for people who want to read more about themselves, and all the work that's been done on this topic.

Tanya Domi:

That's great. It's going to be in Mina Rees? Or is it going to be other places too?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah, that's a great question. It will be on website that's hosted on the CUNY Academic Commons, which is such a great resource. So it'll be public, and then I'm also thinking of creating it in Manifold as a project. It's a platform so it'll be shareable in multiple ways.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, Manifold's great. It's very accessible, right?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah. It has a really nice user-friendly look, and it looks very clear. So, I like that.

Tanya Domi:

Right. Have you talked to women's studies at The Graduate Center about this project?

Elvis Bakaitis:

That's a great question. I actually haven't thus far, but I should.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, you should go talk to them. They could actually promote your curated resources, and share it with CLAGS as well, right?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Definitely. And with CLAGs I would like to bring together other scholars on this topic of queer aging. I think it's really something that we'll see a lot of growth in hopefully in our lives.

Elvis Bakaitis:

So I think that would be really great to bring together a panel discussion in the fall.

Tanya Domi:

That is wonderful librarianship. That's really, really wonderful. When you get ready to make this public, you should come back to our office of communications so that we can share social media about it. This is great work.

Elvis Bakaitis:

I would love to. Thank you so much.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. Is that ongoing or if you've finished it or you're still in the process of pulling together resources?

Elvis Bakaitis:

I'm still in the process. I'm working also... Not a project official advisor, but someone I've worked with for a long time, Ms. Flavia Rando, who is one of the coordinators at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. We had done a class at SAGE, actually about two years ago before COVID, in person, that was really about

lesbian cultural history and Flavia has taught a considerable amount at the Lesbian Herstory Archives on the same similar topics.

Elvis Bakaitis:

So we've been coordinating and thinking about doing a class on queer aging, just kind of getting people's experiences in the mix and making it really multidirectional.

Tanya Domi:

It's really remarkable, all the people that I know that have been doing this librarianship, for example, Polly Thistlethwaite, who's on leave right now. She was one of the founding archivists for the Lesbian Archive in Brooklyn. It's just this amazing nucleus of people. I'm so impressed and it's New York City. So it's always big and significant in the zeitgeist, the culture and the community.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah, definitely. A lot of good small world paths come back to The Graduate Center and also The Herstory Archives.

Tanya Domi:

That's great. Really, really wonderful. Make sure you come back to us. And so what I'm also really interested in is your travel grant on the study of LGBTQ zines at Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University.

Tanya Domi:

It sounds like you have a lot of history here on the queers. You did a fellowship, a residency at The Queer Zine Archive Project, and you also founded The Feminist Zine Project. I'm really interested. New York City Feminist Zine fest is something that you co-founded in here in New York City, and I imagined that you brought this into the GC library here at a Mina Rees library. So tell us about this. This seems to be the month of zines.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Thank you. I hope it truly is. Yes. I love zines. They're very close to my heart. Longtime interest.

Tanya Domi:

How did you get an interest in them? I want to hear how that started for you.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Well, I think in a way I just saw them around and I started creating my own zines pretty quickly and I love tabling at Zine fest.

Elvis Bakaitis:

So that's just a fun way to really connect with your community. You've created something. You're suddenly in a hot sweaty room with other people sharing zines. It seems very simple, but it's really great. And I think for queer people, there's a lot of content in zines that doesn't always make it into the mainstream. We know that in general, but with zines, it's a real highlight where you're really seeing

zines as kind of this cultural underground space that provides this whole world of people expressing themselves in this really odd little unique format. It's like these tiny little booklets, but they're so rich with personal information, with people's personal self-expression. Almost like a diary entry. So my love for zines is very long standing.

Tanya Domi:

I see. Well, it's an art form too, is it not? It's an art form. It seems like it kind of tracks, when you think about the re-emergence of graphic novels, the work of Alison Bechdel. She's the big person, the big queer lesbian person who really brought this all forward and then went to Broadway. You can't make it up, right?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah. The publication of Fun Home really... She had been doing all this work in all the alternative newspapers.

Tanya Domi:

Right. The comic strip that she had was groundbreaking.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Definitely. Dykes to Watch Out For is amazing and she was only able to do it because it was a way to support herself for so many years and then suddenly those publications kind of disappeared and she was like, "Hmm, what do I do now?" It kind of led to creating Fun Home. And there's just been such a huge explosion of comics and zines since then, because I think people will see this and they will actually understand me, whereas before it was all I think still a little subterranean in terms of content.

Tanya Domi:

It was really, really underground.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah. Still a little bit off the record.

Tanya Domi:

Do you think because of social media and because of so many different... Like the internet 2.0 gives a lot of space for platforms like this, right?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Definitely. And yet as a very analog person myself, that's kind of-

Tanya Domi:

That's fair.

Elvis Bakaitis:

I think we can talk a little about the bookstores. I've done a lot of work on feminist bookstores. I have a zine about that.

Tanya Domi:

We're going to get to that. We're going to get to that, right? Yes

Elvis Bakaitis:

But yeah, the physical spaces. The places where we physically see people. I think during COVID, of course, we see how important that is. That's where the good stuff happens. And to me personally, it doesn't happen only in the online space. It's not...

Tanya Domi:

Of course. Of course. Can you tell our listeners what's the difference between comics and zines?

Elvis Bakaitis:

The age old question.

Tanya Domi:

Sorry, I just have to ask, because I want to know.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Zines are an art form, but they're a much more short form and ephemeral creation.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Elvis Bakaitis:

People might create a zine in a day, or there's 24 hours zines. They may continue making them sporadically, but they're very unorganized and you don't make money off zines. So unorganized in the best sense, because I think it keeps a lot of freedom and a lot of true personal expression in zines. Whereas what I've seen is that in comics, whatever type of publishing you have, it ends up kind of giving a commercial aspect to things, and in terms of the feminist angle, I personally started The Feminist Zine fest because I was like, I just don't see content that I want to see centered in an art space that is-

Tanya Domi:

Sure. What did you learn? Did you go to Duke? I mean, did you go down there? Were you able to?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Well, I haven't been able to Tanya-

Tanya Domi:

Oh, darn. [crosstalk 00:13:26] Isn't Duke reopening?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yes. They have been open for researchers on their own campus so far, but I look forward to going there in the Fall.

Tanya Domi:

Oh God, I'm sure you can't wait to do that, right?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Absolutely. I'm definitely looking forward to kind of diving into the old nineties zines and just getting a sense of that.

Tanya Domi:

I want to hear all about that. After you make those trips, we'll have you back on the podcast, but let me ask you, what have you done within Mina Rees? Have you curated any zines yet or are you collecting them? Can you tell us what you've done here at GC?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Sure. That's a great question. We had an exhibit down in the library that was all about zines actually about two years ago and that was kind of featuring zines as an art form.

Elvis Bakaitis:

And I did a couple [inaudible 00:14:18] jobs for folks, but another GC student put together a syllabi basically, and kind of pulled together GC students and were teaching at the campuses to say, "Hey, how am I teaching?" Maybe we can share our strategies for teaching at CUNY specifically and make it into zine. So that's online.

Tanya Domi:

I'd probably use that at my class at Hunter right now, which is Global LGBT Human Rights. Maybe there's something globally out there. That's so interesting. I can't wait to hear about what you find out down there. So in your librarianship and at the graduate center, I know that there is this queer listserv. I'm actually on it. Do you share information on that queer research for queer faculty across the CUNY system?

Elvis Bakaitis:

That's a great question. I haven't too much, but you know, what is really great and I don't know if you're familiar with this.

Elvis Bakaitis:

So the LGBTQ Council, which is like a CUNY wide council, they created the hub, the LGBTQ hub. Have you heard of this at all?

Tanya Domi:

No, I haven't. I'm sort of out of it. I do think it's because I'm staff and I'm adjunct I don't hear as much. I should probably know more about this.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Oh no, it's great. Well, I think it's good for anyone to know about, but yeah, so the council created basically a resource-based website that's actually on the cuny.edu page. So it's university-wide and so..

Tanya Domi:

Oh I did hear about that. I take that back. I did hear about it and I didn't really follow up on it. Okay.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah, no, it's great. So I was really happy that it had been created because just a year or so ago, I had been thinking, wow, CUNY really needs this. We don't really have integrated support for queer students.

Elvis Bakaitis:

And, to me, the funny thing about CUNY is that if you think about it, it's actually the largest population of queer students in the New York city Metro area, simply because of the size of CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. Without a doubt. Yeah. That makes sense.

Elvis Bakaitis:

I think it hasn't been documented because usually they don't include those questions in demographics. So for CUNY, it really stands out to me as like this giant entity. And I don't know that CUNY students are always represented in academic conceptions of queer studies with their actual life experience being a lot of recent immigrants or black students, you often kind of see a gap and I think that recognizing that will really push hopefully CUNY forward to invest more and its queer students than it even has already.

Tanya Domi:

That's great. I should definitely look at that. I'm teaching in class right now of nine students and they're great.

Tanya Domi:

They're all undergrads, it's at Hunter in the human rights program and a number of them self-identify as queer. So it's really cool. This is my second time teaching it. So is there anything else you want to touch on about this project?

Elvis Bakaitis:

I just wanted to mention the preferred names issue because we're fighting really hard to make it more consistent for CUNY students. So currently a CUNY, if you want to use a name, that's not your legal name, a city law was passed that you legally have this right to use it in all contexts on your ID, on your email, in the zoom. However, the real life experience of CUNY students is really quite far from that goal.

Tanya Domi:

Much more complicated isn't it?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah, it's very systems based. So it's not because there's not a will it's because there's not currently a way.

Elvis Bakaitis:

And CUNY students are really hitting that wall frequently. Red Washburn who teaches at Kingsborough Community College pulled together this transgender town hall that happened about a month ago where students were really able to speak from their own experiences at CUNY. And a lot of emotions, a lot of pain expressed because people are just hitting that wall and we want that to hopefully stop pretty soon. So that's a lot of the work that I'm involved with on the council and through class as well.

Tanya Domi:

Oh that's great.

Elvis Bakaitis:

[crosstalk 00:18:26] Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

I should know more about the council.

Elvis Bakaitis:

It's great. I highly recommend it.

Tanya Domi:

Send me a link to the council and we'll put it in the podcast.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Oh, perfect. [crosstalk 00:18:37].

Tanya Domi:

Okay. I'm happy to do that. Send me a link. And the third grant that you received, which is I think really cool.

Tanya Domi:

It was for research at the Schlesinger Library Oral Grant at Harvard University to trace the lineage of women in the print movement, and in this case, for your research is the Bluestockings Bookstore here in New York city. Very, very well known to many of us here in the city. A place where women and queer people are able to go. Very special given the onslaught of the big like Barnes and Nobles taking out the independent bookstores and yet Bluestockings is hanging in there. Tell us where you are on this project.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Sure. Thank you so much. Yeah. This was a project that is kind of moving along because it was something I worked on in library school as well. So I've been having conversations with Bluestockings volunteers for a couple of years now. And so this was like a natural extension of that.

Elvis Bakaitis:

And I applied for the grant just because I wanted to make it a little bit more official that this was a substantial oral history undertaking and Bluestockings is amazing. So it's been around since 1999, it was founded by Kathryn Welsh who identified as queer as at that time. And she had been from New Orleans

and she went to New York city and was like, "I can't believe there's no feminist bookstores here. How weird?" Because at that time in the nineties, there were so many feminist bookstores. There were like 120 across the United States.

Tanya Domi:

Of course. Yeah.

Elvis Bakaitis:

So you might remember some of that [crosstalk 00:20:18].

Tanya Domi:

I do remember. And all the queer bookstores too, which are also gone. Many of them have been wiped out.

Elvis Bakaitis:

One interesting thing that I learned in the process of researching just kind of the backstory of this was so Amazon.com is often credited for killing off the bookstores aggressively across the country.

Elvis Bakaitis:

But there were two interesting things. One to me was this narrative of, oh, the feminist bookstores failed and the queer bookstores because we don't need them anymore. And that's just not true. It's not accurate. They actually hung on much longer and were able to survive economically for much longer than other niche bookstores because everyone was suffering from Amazon.

Tanya Domi:

That's so interesting.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah. So you look at periodicals from the nineties or in these papers and the Christian bookstores, Jewish bookstores, everybody is like, "Hey, our bookstores are being threatened. This is a real problem." And then the feminist bookstores are like keep trekking along. They have a really solid base.

Tanya Domi:

Do you think it's a community hub, right? This is where people come together. They want to be with each other. It's a solidarity action. Don't you think in some ways?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Absolutely. And that goes back to the analog idea of just the [crosstalk 00:21:42] core. It's the good stuff. So yeah, Bluestockings is much more than a bookstore. When you talk to people, they'll say things without much prompting of, "oh, the store saved my life. I would have not stayed in New York City had it not been for Bluestockings. I would have moved. I'm here physically because of Bluestockings" and it's, you know.

Tanya Domi:

Those are very moving testimonials.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Exactly. And it's knowing the richness of that space as an emotional support hub, as a place where people can get housing support. It's not a social service, but it's very close and it's all run by usually people who are under 35 years of age. So it's very much a youth run volunteer space. And I think that's just a really rare and beautiful thing.

Tanya Domi:

Like you said, it's not just a bookstore, there's over 300 events each year, support for queer youth. And you have a working partnership with Ashley-Luisa Santangelo on this project supported by the Carnegie-Whitney Grant. Well that brings in your work on lesbians as they age, right?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah, exactly. So I had worked with Ashley-Luisa. We had worked together through the Lesbian Herstory Archives to put together an exhibit at the New York Historical Society two years ago. So that was called By the Force of Our Presence and I think maybe the second large-scale exhibit that the Lesbian Herstory Archives had coordinated with a major institution. So I think the previous one was at the Brooklyn Historical Society maybe in the two thousands. I'm not sure when.

Tanya Domi:

Wow.

Elvis Bakaitis:

But yeah, it was a major undertaking, so it was a lot of work, but we knew that thousands of people would then see these materials from the archives. [crosstalk 00:23:25]

Tanya Domi:

For sure, right?

Elvis Bakaitis:

But one thing I was going to say that I think is another fun history nugget, which I came across was so going back to Amazon, not to dwell too long on them, but they actually took their name from the first women's bookstore in the United States.

Tanya Domi:

Oh my God. That makes sense. The name, that makes sense.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Right. And it's [crosstalk 00:23:47] yeah.

Tanya Domi:

I did not know that. I learned something today Elvis.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah. So it was founded in 1970 Amazon Books in Minneapolis. And so once Amazon.com started going suddenly that little bookstore was like, "Hey, what's happening? We're getting these phone calls about a website we know nothing about it's very confusing." And they took Amazon at court, but in the legal battle [crosstalk 00:24:14].

Tanya Domi:

For copyright right? Infringement?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Right. Exactly. But at that point, Amazon made the case that if they were serving a general public, whereas the little Amazon was serving only gay people and they literally in court said, "Aren't you all gay? We think you've only serve the gay community. Is that correct?"

Elvis Bakaitis:

These are like actual quotes. So it was pretty fraught and I think exposes a homophobic element in Amazon's rise. Not that they aren't bad for many reasons, but that's one special.

Tanya Domi:

Right. How interesting. So what were you able to do in terms of your research here, given the grant that you received?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah. So I've continued having really in-depth conversations with people who have volunteered at Bluestockings in different capacities for multiple years. So.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yeah. So talking to people who've been on the collective is really different than talking to someone who has volunteered there a little bit here and there. There's really different layers of how people become involved and then how connected they feel to that space.

Tanya Domi:

So this is going to be an oral history project?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Yes. It is in an oral history project and it's still ongoing in the sense that I'm very committed to giving back to that community in a way. And just hoping that people will see that our voice is reflected in a mini history of Bluestockings, which is what I would hope to create [crosstalk 00:25:34].

Tanya Domi:

I see. Is it going to be printed and online or what do you envision doing?

Elvis Bakaitis:

That's a great question. I was thinking, pulling it into like a journal article as one option and making it [crosstalk 00:25:49].

Tanya Domi:

Analog, yes [crosstalk 00:25:51].

Elvis Bakaitis:

But yeah. And also maybe a zine, who knows, we'll see how far I get.

Tanya Domi:

Very interesting work, important work. Everybody thinks about Pride and they think about marching down the street. But what happens to all the stories of so many people? I think about some of the work I've done. A lot of that work is at the Cornell Library now, for National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and then there's like television depositories at like Vanderbilt.

Tanya Domi:

They have those just in my work on gays in the military and the work I did in Washington. So it's all really, really important because it's history, as you've said today about zines, as an example, that this is about experiences of queer people that a lot of people just don't ever see it. They just don't see it because it's within a community that had to do it in an insular and underground way for a long time.

Elvis Bakaitis:

That's a great point. And yeah. I'm curious about your work with gays in the military as well. It sounds, yeah. Really adds a good dimension to the military to know that queer people have always been in these institutions as well as like on the grassroots. And yeah, that was a big focus. I'm really into like grassroots, actual community. And so going back to the aging project, just looking for not only what social scientists or sociologists say about queer elders, but literally what do people say about their own lives? You know?

Tanya Domi:

Right. Not as subjects, but as real people that want to share their stories.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Exactly. That's the ideal, that's the good stuff.

Tanya Domi:

It's very powerful, wonderful work. What's next for you?

Elvis Bakaitis:

That's a great question.

Tanya Domi:

Well first of all going to return to our offices, right Elvis?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Oh yes,

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Elvis Bakaitis:

That will happen. We will commute back slowly.

Tanya Domi:

That's right. So what's next for you?

Elvis Bakaitis:

Well, a lot of the work that I do at the Graduate Center is about, open scholarship and making sure that everyone has access to research. So that's something we always coordinate is an open pedagogy fellowship in the fall. That's more like what I do here at the GC, but I'm also the liaison for women and gender studies. So to any students please come, contact me, say hello in the coming fall. And yeah, I just look forward to really getting to delve into these projects.

Elvis Bakaitis:

I'm also doing a panel discussion or organizing it about Bluestockings through the bibliographic society of America and the fall. So that will be a nice way to bring in different people who have experience with that space, talking about it in a different context. Thank you so much for having me.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely great work and happy pride to you and all your colleagues and your collaborators. It sounds like wonderful work and wonderful contributions. Please come back and let us know in the office because we want to support the queer community of the Graduate Center and all of our scholars.

Elvis Bakaitis:

Very much likewise. Thank you, Tanya. And thank you to The Thought Project for supporting this work. So, much obliged.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest Elvis Bakaitis, the Interim Head of the Reference Desk in the Mina Rees Library at the Graduate Center at CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolff of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi tune in next week.