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. Joining us today is Emily Drabinski, the Interim Chief Librarian and the Critical Pedagogy Librarian of the Minor East Library at the CUNY Graduate Center. She is also a part-time faculty member at the Pratt Institute School of Information. She formerly held the position of coordinator of library instruction at Long Island University, Brooklyn, where she worked from 2008 to 2019. She was a 2014 library journal, Mover and Shaker advocate and winner of the Ilene F. Rockman Instruction Publication of the Year in 2015, for her article, "Towards a Kairos Of Library Instruction."

Tanya Domi:
Emily is a leading scholar of librarianship, the Kairos of library instruction article. And her 2013, "Queering the Catalog," are Canonical text in the library and information sciences curriculum. Drabinski co-edited the 2009 Critical Library Instruction, Theories and Methods and she edits the Library Juice Press series on gender and sexuality in library and information services. Drabinski co-edited a 2019 library trends issue, "Labor in Academic Libraries." Emily is a candidate for the 2023, 2024 presidency of the American Library Association. The association is the foremost national organization, providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities, through a central programs and services for more than 140 years. She has been active in the ALA over many years. Having served as the chair of the International Relations Committee as the counselor at large and chair of the Association of College and Research Libraries, information literacy frameworks and standards committee and she is running against Kelvin Watson. Validating begins on March 14th and runs through April 6th. Welcome back to the Thought Project, Emily Drabinski.

Emily Drabinski:
Thank you so much, Tanya. It's exciting to be here.

Tanya Domi:
This is great. Just for our audience information, this is the first time the Thought Project has returned to the studio at CUNY TV. We are so happy to be back. Emily, you became the interim chief librarian at the Graduate Center on March 16th, 2020. It must have been bitter sweet. And, what was the first thing on your mind that day?

Emily Drabinski:
I knew I was going to take over this role from [inaudible 00:03:37], who headed over to central. And I was on a last hurrah, visiting my family who had gone to the Philippines. My partner had a Fulbright scholarship and ended up in Manila and was scheduled to be there for five months and the pandemic hit and I didn't believe it. I kept changing my transfer airport, so I wouldn't get blocked coming back to the country and it felt like I was in an action movie, rolling under the doors, the garage doors closed and then came back to the GC. But, first thing on my mind was, making sure people had what they needed, to be able to continue to do their jobs and that we could all survive.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely. Survival of the fittest, but this kind of event for graduate students, particularly PhD students is devastating because...

Emily Drabinski:
Absolutely devastating.

Tanya Domi:
Right. Because it rules out the whole idea of field research. And therefore, the library becomes a prominent fixture in your mind and in your daily life. And I know, to the credit of Poly, I was working with Poly for several years and knowing that she did so much to build up the digital reserves of the library and I was always talking about open access. So, you walked in with a floor under your feet. Right?

Emily Drabinski:
Definitely. Yes. This is a library that thinks of itself as part of a network and that was a real focus of Polly's work and...

Tanya Domi:
Yeah, her collaboration with NYPL...

Emily Drabinski:
With NYPL. Yes. With all of the libraries in the Metro system with OCLC shares and these are things that if you're a librarian listening and you're nodding along and the rest of you are like, "Wait, what? I just wanted to get my book." But, those infrastructures of sharing are so crucial to what we do and so much work was put into that. So, we started from a pretty good place, but there is, especially for humanity students and for historians, who need to do searchable research.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Emily Drabinski:
... there's no substitute for being able to come into the library. And, that was something that we couldn't provide for a very long time.

Tanya Domi:
For sure. Absolutely. So, what did you do during the pandemic? You and your staff returned to the library and I don't remember at what point was that?

Emily Drabinski:
So, we reopened for students in June 2021, after being closed for more than a year and it was tough. We had vaccines at that point. And so...

Tanya Domi:
Right.
Emily Drabinski:
Those of us who'd been vaccinated, I think felt a little easier about it, but it was stressful and difficult and hard and scary and how do we gather again? This is March 2022 and it's the first time you've been back in the studio. How do we walk back towards being together? So, we opened in June and saw students come in, we had a reservation system, you had to reserve a spot, we kept the numbers really low to keep density down.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Emily Drabinski:
And, every student we saw, made my heart swell 18 sizes. We learned both that, the library's crucial for research, but it's also crucial just to leave your apartment and get some quiet from your kids and roommates and be able to sit and do working in quiet space in Midtown Manhattan and we are now essentially open as we always have been, evenings and weekends and we've got a full slate of in-person services.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah. That was a hard thought for and very challenging time, because you and your staff were the first people providing services to students that returned to the building. That was before all of us returned in August.

Emily Drabinski:
Yes.

Tanya Domi:
And so, you guys broke the ground on return.

Emily Drabinski:
We did. I was eager to do it, to be honest. I am someone who did not thrive at home at all.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah.

Emily Drabinski:
Who really needs to leave and then go back again to feel good.

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Emily Drabinski:
So, it was something that we all worked really hard on and to see how crucial you are to the intellectual life of the city and to the Graduate Center in De CUNY, I take that really seriously. I think all of us do.
Tanya Domi:
That's wonderful. And so this week, we return to the building for 70% of staff and it's really great. I've seen several people including yourself.

Emily Drabinski:
Including you. Hi [crosstalk 00:08:31]

Tanya Domi:
Including you, Emily.

Emily Drabinski:
How have you been. We made it.

Tanya Domi:
And, Kevin Wolf, my audio engineer and here at CUNY TV and Lisa who also works in the radio team, I have to say that this is really wonderful. Right?

Emily Drabinski:
Listen, there's no substitute for public life, there's no substitute for contact. I don't think. And, to the extent that it's safe to do so, I'm so pleased to be back.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah. And kudos to our librarian staff and all that you all did for the Graduate Center and for the students.

Emily Drabinski:
I have to shout out my colleague, Curtis Matthew, who-

Tanya Domi:
Oh, yes.

Emily Drabinski:
... has done just incredible work, getting our circulation system back up and running and staffing the service point, so that we're able to invite students back for evening and weekend service. He's been a rock.

Tanya Domi:
He's the person who's initiated that.

Emily Drabinski:
He's an exceptional leader and I'm so grateful to have him on my side to all of this.
I do know Curtis. I know Curtis. Yes, he's terrific. That's wonderful. So, let me just also ask you another question about the pandemic. Did it compel you to rethink librarianship? If it did, did you begin to think about, "Okay. So here we are, we're in this pandemic. We don't really know how long it's going to last." Did it give you an opportunity to think about librarianship and maybe how it should be tweaked or also possibilities for after the pandemic as well?

Emily Drabinski:
It's an interesting question. So, librarians are actually at the forefront of a lot of technological change.

Tanya Domi:
Of course.

Emily Drabinski:
We are the first to adopt new computing technologies and we were really quite innovative.

Tanya Domi:
Yes.

Emily Drabinski:
If the pandemic taught me anything though, if it did anything, it made me more of a traditionalist. What I saw people wanting from the library were things that the library has always been a space for, connecting you to the resources you need, to do your research project, giving you access to a bathroom and a well-lit heated or cooled space, although I have my complaints about HVAC. My office is very chilly in the winter. But that aside, the library is a space where you can go that is non-commercial and that is freely available to you, if you're a member of the community, that is something that... I don't know that it was forgotten, but I've been in so many contexts where people have said, "Oh, the library is a portal, the internet changes everything. Why do we need a library anymore, because you can just go to the internet." But I think, we all learned the limits of that.

Tanya Domi:
Yes.

Emily Drabinski:
It actually isn't enough. You need to be able to leave where you are and go somewhere else and be in communion with others who are engaged in intellectual pursuits and I think, I have a new found interest in creating those kinds of experiences for myself and for others in the library.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah. Fair enough too. And, you have to lay your hands on a book.

Emily Drabinski:
Oh, you have to lay your hands on book.

Tanya Domi:
Hands on a book.

Emily Drabinski:
You do.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah.

Emily Drabinski:
You have to walk to the shelf to get the book that you looked up and then be like, "Oh, this other book over here actually looks relevant also." And you pull it off shelf and you look at it.

Tanya Domi:
And so... Exactly.

Emily Drabinski:
There's just no substitute for that. And it's not nostalgia for me, that's actually the material practice of knowledge production, walking around the library and picking out some books.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely.

Emily Drabinski:
That's what it's about.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely. So, before we get to the big conversation between us about your candidacy for the American Library Association Presidency, I want to ask, you have done couple of podcasts. We're living in this era in America, in this moment in America and I think it harkens back to the McCarthy era and some different waves. But, can we talk about the banning of books and book lists and banning of books and schools and in public libraries. And I wouldn't be surprised before this is all over that we're going to see burning of books.

Emily Drabinski:
Oh yeah. I think you have seen that.

Tanya Domi:
What are your thoughts on this? I know you have strong thoughts on it, but let's start about the banning of books and the intervention of "Parents trying to protect their children from Critical Race Theory."

Emily Drabinski:
Yeah. It's just not about books. It's like the fight against gay marriage. Was not about, not wanting gay people to get married, it's about not wanting gay people at all.
Tanya Domi:
That's right.

Emily Drabinski:
So, you ban books about LGBTQ experience or you ban books about black experience-

Tanya Domi:
The holocaust.

Emily Drabinski:
... the holocaust, you ban these books not because you don't want people to read them, but because you don't want black people, Jewish people, gay people to exist at all. So, it's very scary and very violent and super organized. And I think, that's the thing that's most frightening to me.

Tanya Domi:
Yes.

Emily Drabinski:
That these are not one off individual parents saying, "Oh, my child is precious."

Tanya Domi:
Right. Most is being initiated by governors and-

Emily Drabinski:
Oh yeah.

Tanya Domi:
... legislators and mayors and it's like, we've let loose a burning fire, that's just consuming people.

Emily Drabinski:
The right is highly organized and really well resourced. There's a great book by Jen Trady called, "The Revolution That Wasn't." She talks about the influence of the internet on organizing and makes the case that I find compelling and true, that the far right simply has access to more money and time. And, there's a reason that their websites are prettier than a union website, because they just have more money and more resources-

Tanya Domi:
More resources. Right.

Emily Drabinski:
... to pour into that and they're better at organizing people around a disciplined party line, where we're against all kinds of difference. We want a white Christian nation and we're going to take steps
everywhere we can to make that happen. And, they also know that people feel good when they can experience power in a collective act.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Emily Drabinski:
So, they produce ways into those feelings of solidarity that we work for on the left as well. But, I can with another two or three angry white mob parents, organized to get a book off a library shelf and succeed and get a feeling of real capacity and power to change the world. So I think, the right is just really better at doing that right now, because they have more resources and the party discipline is really for somebody on the left, it's sort of impressive to see.

Tanya Domi:
Sure. And, also what drives their organizing is just this sheer rage.

Emily Drabinski:
Oh yeah.

Tanya Domi:
So, you don't have that on the democratic left, rage.

Emily Drabinski:
Yes.

Tanya Domi:
We are angry about losing our voting rights and we're angry about those things. But the rage that is coming out of these people, just that to me is very threatening. Because from that rage comes violence and acts of violence being these books and removing books... It's very interesting what you say, you're talking about, erasing the Holocaust, erasing the history of slavery in America and the fact that the parents want to protect their children from feeling bad about the history of the country. And, what I find so interesting is, Heath Brown, one of our faculty members, who's John Jay and here at the Graduate Center wrote a book called "Homeschooling The Right." And, he was just in an Atlantic Magazine piece called Red Parent Blue Parent, talking about these issues, about the books...

Emily Drabinski:
I have to pick that up.

Tanya Domi:
Yes. You have to pick it up. His book is great. And he says, the biggest success that the right claims and you don't see them talking about it publicly, is homeschooling.

Emily Drabinski:
Oh yeah.
Tanya Domi: Absolutely.

Emily Drabinski: Absolutely.

Tanya Domi: And they give them credit when they're at these meetings or conventions, they always give big props to homeschoolers. And, that's where you create citizenship. That's where you create citizens.

Emily Drabinski: And it's also... Public education is also one of the public investments we make on behalf.

Tanya Domi: The comments. Yes.

Emily Drabinski: Our share of the social rage that goes to public institutions, like schools, roads, parks, hospitals, libraries-

Tanya Domi: Right. Libraries.

Emily Drabinski: ... and these sort of... So, it's about book banning and it's about hate and it's about fear, but it's also about not wanting a robust public sector. So, not abandon something.

Tanya Domi: That's right. So that, something can be challenged, that there would be a discourse that would challenge, there would be debates.

Emily Drabinski: Yeah. But, they don't even want schools or libraries at all.

Tanya Domi: That's right.

Emily Drabinski: They want all of it to be privatized and [crosstalk 00:17:39].

Tanya Domi: Absolutely.

Emily Drabinski:
It's tough. And so, where are the librarians on that, pretty strongly against these arrogations of our professional expertise to select materials for our communities, like that's our core job.

Tanya Domi:
Secret function.

Emily Drabinski:
That's what we do. That's what you are made to do here, is to pick resources and curate them for the community that I serve.

Tanya Domi:
But, haven't librarians always been at the Vanguard of freedom more or less, protecting people's...

Emily Drabinski:
Yeah. I think in some ways.

Tanya Domi:
Personal information from the government, your community's pretty cool.

Emily Drabinski:
I think our community's pretty cool, but American libraries are like any other American institution.

Tanya Domi:
True.

Emily Drabinski:
It's rooted in racial exclusions.

Tanya Domi:
True.

Emily Drabinski:
Black people not being banned from libraries in the South.

Tanya Domi:
True.

Emily Drabinski:
That's a part of our heritage.

Tanya Domi:
Sure. Of course.
Emily Drabinski:
But, our commitment to the right to read what you want to read is also fairly core commitment for almost everyone I know in the field.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Emily Drabinski:
So, and that cuts across party lines. And so, one of the things the right has done, is make the selection of books of political question.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Emily Drabinski:
When, it's a professional question, I get to make the decisions about how we're going to spend our resources in terms of the materials we collect.

Tanya Domi:
And what you're going to purchase.

Emily Drabinski:
Yeah. And that's my job and Jenison Lucas is the current president of the association of library services to children and her position on this is, I think, one of the clearest I've seen that, by politicizing what we do as professionals.

Tanya Domi:
You compromise.

Emily Drabinski:
Yeah. These activists are taking away our professional field of terrain of struggle and it's not... Yeah. It's something we're all fighting against, I think.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely. Okay. Well, I wanted to get that out on the table.

Emily Drabinski:
Oh yeah. It's like the thing that's happening right now and I haven't seen it roll up to like this, the CUNY system, but I'm sure there are academic libraries facing similar battles in other parts of the country.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely. I have friends on Vanderbilt faculty and they're surrounded. Nashville, is where this all went down on mouse.
Emily Drabinski:
Of course.

Tanya Domi:
On Maus, the book a Maus, graphic novel about the history of the Holocaust and God, we wouldn't want our children to know about that or we wouldn't want them to feel bad about that. Well, we have a more antisemitic attacks now in New York than any other minority group. It's the number one hate crimes are carried out and this includes graffiti in the NYPD database. And then the second most is LGBT. And the third most is Muslim in New York City. And so, this is a terrible time to say, let's get rid of mouse.

Emily Drabinski:
Oh yeah. And I'm going to go home after work to my Jewish girlfriend and our Jewish son and we're going to have dinner and fight about homework and it's hard to live inside of that and what's the hate about that. But, that is a lot apparently.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely. So, this is a tenuous time. It's a frightening time and librarianship is, I follow them. And as I told you, as we were walking down here, you and I are both alumni of Columbia, there's 27 libraries at Columbia and I'm just always wowed by it. I call it one of the jewels in the crown. Sorry, CUNY. I have to say something about it. I was there on the weekend. I also want to say, at the time we're talking about Russia right now in the Balkans and the Columbia libraries have 80,000 tax from former Yugoslavia, the largest collection outside of the region.

Emily Drabinski:
Wow.

Tanya Domi:
So, I'm just wowed by librarians. And as a scholar myself in here, we are at the CUNY Graduate Center, PhD education, graduate education, you cannot underestimate just how important really well educated, scholarly librarians are in our ongoing research. I was just there this weekend and I was talking to this librarian. I said, "Are you student?" You can't tell now. She said, "I'm staff." I said, "Oh, we love you." Love to the librarians. And, now we want to talk to you, Emily, about your candidacy for the American Library Association, 23, 24, you are running against Kelvin...
Sorry, Kelvin. It's right in front of me. Balloting begins on March 14th and it runs through April 6th. You have a website, you've done so many podcasts, you're running a very well organized campaign. I can say that as a former politico, I used to work in politics. Messages, everything. What is your message? Why are you running?

Emily Drabinski:
You're asking me that on a day when I'm asking myself that. So, take me [crosstalk 00:23:02]

Tanya Domi:
Well, if you aren't asking yourself, then you shouldn't be running.

Emily Drabinski:
I think, the pandemic has shown all of us that the world could be different. We know that the world could be different than it is, because it was different than it has ever been before and we're all encountering it here at CUNY this week. So, it's a time of incredible devastation, but I think also a time of incredible opportunity, if we can jump in this moment where workers, especially are seeing their power and seeing how crucial it is that we be organized against capital in order to keep our institutions going.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Emily Drabinski:
I think, now is the moment for a left progressive vision to take hold among workers at all levels. And I think, we see that in union campaigns at Starbucks, we see it happening in...

Tanya Domi:
Amazon.

Emily Drabinski:
Amazon warehouses. We see organizing in the South, that's really knocking my socks off and library workers have been at the front lines of this pandemic. They are the people who have been...

Tanya Domi:
Central workers.

Emily Drabinski:
Yeah. They've been asked to do all kinds of things that are beyond the purview of the library, sending out COVID tests, being the site for where you get Narcan, as the extended last funded public good. In most places, the library is only place you can go to stop in and check your email, go to the bathroom, get a book, meet a friend without having to pay an admission fee and without...

Tanya Domi:
Yeah. No commercial transaction.
Emily Drabinski:
Yeah. Without having to be advertised to. And so, we need those spaces to be fully funded. We need other public goods to be and institutions to be fully funded, so the library can do what it's meant to do. I'm a librarian, but I've also spent a lot of time doing union work. I've been on strike, I've been locked out. All of those experiences tell me that, if we can organize collective power, in this moment where power seems to be on the ground and if you can pick it up, you can have it in many ways. And I think, as a collective, there are 46,000... I just got the member list. There are 46,000 members of the American Library Association. That's probably a fraction of the total number of people working in libraries. But if we could organize that sector around the kinds of priorities that you and I have been talking about here, the right to read and that sort of thing, everything in the world would be better. So, yeah, I think I'm somebody who can do that. So, I'm running.

Tanya Domi:
So, you've been really involved in the ALA. I want our audience to know that, actually the ALA is, according to them is the foremost national organization, providing resources to inspire a library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services for more than 140 years. Didn't you say it's the fifth largest trade organization, trade association in the United States.

Emily Drabinski:
That's right.

Tanya Domi:
Oh, that's amazing. You have served as the ALA chair of the International Relations Committee. You are also counselor at large and chair of the Association of College and Research libraries, information, literacy frameworks and standards committee. You've got quite a CV for this position.

Emily Drabinski:
Thank you for you saying that. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
That's pretty August credentials there. So, what kind of feedback are you getting? Because, I understand you've been calling people and talking to people and you're doing these podcasts, you're interacting with the members. What are you hearing from them?

Emily Drabinski:
People are worried and scared. They're tired, they're angry. They are looking for ways to feel less alone in their work. And, I'm describing myself in many ways also.

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Emily Drabinski:
We've come out of two years of isolation and intense demands on our resources and services. And, I think people are excited for hopeful messages that are about coming together and making change and wrenching from the players that we were talking about earlier, who want to privatize everything, including the air to wrench some of that back for public use, the ways that we do that here at CUNY and the ways that we do that in public libraries. So, I think people are excited about the campaign.

Tanya Domi: Cool.

Emily Drabinski: Unless they're voting for Kelvin, they're a little less excited.

Tanya Domi: Well, we'll drop the link into your website to give everybody into the podcast narrative. We'll give everybody an opportunity to take a look at what you have to say, what do you do for fun? I know you're a cat person, because I'm a cat person and I always see your photos on Twitter. What do you do for fun?

Emily Drabinski: I have cats. This will surprise you. I'm a reader.

Tanya Domi: Really?

Emily Drabinski: I read a lot. I... Yep.

Tanya Domi: Really?

Emily Drabinski: I have a...

Tanya Domi: Can't believe it.

Emily Drabinski: I'm in this reading group, this reading challenge group organized by the labor historian, Julie Green, whose book on the Panama canals, a must read.
And, we have 50 categories of books and we have to read a book in each category. So, I'm reading a book a week. And the other thing that I just...

Tanya Domi:
That's rigorous.

Emily Drabinski:
It's rigorous and its really fun.

Tanya Domi:
Okay.

Emily Drabinski:
I'm reading so many more works in translation than I ever had before and it really is true. A book can take you to another world. The other thing I'm doing a lot for fun and I don't want to leave this out of the podcast-

Tanya Domi:
Yes.

Emily Drabinski:
... I am training for a springtime show with my adult onset, synchronized swimming squad.

Tanya Domi:
Oh my God.

Emily Drabinski:
So, that's on Saturdays. We are going to be doing...

Tanya Domi:
That's rigorous too.

Emily Drabinski:
Extremely rigorous. We have to build the entire routine around the fact that I can't do a backwards summer salt underwater. But that's okay.

Tanya Domi:
So, which pool do you work out at?

Emily Drabinski:
We're at the Berkeley Carroll pool on Saturdays, practicing our routines. So, I'll make sure that you know what the date of the [crosstalk 00:29:14]
Tanya Domi:
Okay. Because, I am wowed. Because, I know that, that is really rigorous. I am a lap swimmer.

Emily Drabinski:
You're a lap swimmer?

Tanya Domi:
Yes I am.

Emily Drabinski:
So, you know what I'm talking about?

Tanya Domi:
Yes. I do know what you’re talking about. That's like core strength.

Emily Drabinski:
Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
It's like you rock.

Emily Drabinski:
So, it's me and one heavily pregnant member and we're having to build a routine around our-

Tanya Domi:
Wow.

Emily Drabinski:
... attendant challenges. But, it takes everybody to get in the pool.

Tanya Domi:
Wow. Okay. Is there anything else that you want to ask or is there any other comment that you want to make before we say goodbye?

Emily Drabinski:
I don't know. It's an exciting moment, I think. And it's so nice to see you and it's so nice to talk with you.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely.

Emily Drabinski:
And the return to public life-
Tanya Domi:
Yes.

Emily Drabinski:
... that we're seeing in New York City is wonderful.

Tanya Domi:
Is wonderful.

Emily Drabinski:
That's wonderful and that's what we need to be doing. We need to be spending more time with one another and-

Tanya Domi:
Okay, Emily.

Emily Drabinski:
... grateful to spend it with you.

Tanya Domi:
Thank you. After you win, we will have you back-

Emily Drabinski:
That's going to be exciting.

Tanya Domi:
... to the Thought Project.

Emily Drabinski:
Yes.

Tanya Domi:
We will have you back. Okay?

Emily Drabinski:
All right. Thank you so much, Tanya. I appreciate it.

Tanya Domi:
Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Emily Drabinski, the interim chief librarian at the CUNY Graduate Center. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.