JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Justene Hill Edwards Interview
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Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
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CREW MEMBER:

Justine Hill Edwards interview, take one. Marker. And just a reminder to silence cell phones or put them on vibrate.

Building wealth through the institution of slavery

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

So costs of enslaved men, women, and children could range, really, from a few hundred for an enslaved child, into the thousands for a prime age enslaved woman or man. Interestingly, there was this trade, specifically out of Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, called the "fancy trade." It was a trade in primarily light-skinned, biracial, young women who were sold as concubines to wealthy enslavers. And these young women could be sold for thousands of dollars. They were seen as not only a commodity of property, but really as a kind of sexual slave to an enslaver who could afford it. So we have a broad range of prices, again, from the hundreds into the thousands. But it really gives us, I think, a clearer sense of just the profitability, the wealth that was generated by the sale of slaves. So we're talking about, again, young enslaved women in their teens and early twenties. And again, they

were sold as essentially sex slaves. So we are talking about the trafficking in the bodies of young enslaved women.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Slavery was part and parcel of not just American culture in general, but Southern culture in particular. Slavery and the culture of slavery was embedded in every legal, social, cultural, economic aspect of Southern society. And so in some ways, when we talk about Southern society in the first six decades of the 19th century, we are talking by and large about slavery in some way. Then kind of taking a step back and broadening out our understanding of the kind of economic importance of slavery on the eve of the Civil War, again, about 3.9 million enslaved people in the US. And they accounted for the largest financial asset in the US, approximately $3 billion worth of wealth in slave property.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so these enslaved men, women, and children were cultivating the cotton that helped fuel textile mills in the North. They were cultivating and picking cotton that was then shipped to places like Liverpool to kind of create new markets for American cotton and, by and large, American industry. So in many ways, it's hard to not see the real importance of not just slavery, but the lives of enslaved people in the growth and spread and expansion of the American economy in the 19th century.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

American cotton in particular, was one of the most valuable exports of the US. And these products went again Trans-Atlanticly to places like Liverpool and London. Interestingly enough, enslavers were kind of using and exporting their brand of plantation management, in terms of how they manage their slaves abroad. It was not uncommon for slave holders to travel to places like Egypt, for example, and try to export their knowledge about labor

management and plantation management abroad. In many ways, yes, we are talking about the economic power of the U.S. at this period of time, but we're also talking about the exportation of American ideas about labor, about slavery, and ultimately about race.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I think it is important to start off with the fact that in places such as South Carolina and Georgia and even Virginia, to some extent in the colonial period, slavery was seen as a way to build one's wealth and one's status. And that became even more of a prominent idea, especially in the 19th century, with the kind of rising growth of cotton. Enslavers began to see slavery, and began to invest in land, in the technologies of cotton cultivation, and in particular in slaves, because they saw slavery, especially plantation slavery, as a way to build wealth.

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Yes, there were ideas of kind of being a benevolent paternalist master, right? That kind of endowed their slaves with protection and with kind of parental guidance, but by and large enslavers invested in slavery because they wanted to make money, because they wanted to build wealth. And they understood, very clearly, that slavery was an economic institution on which they could build wealth, not just for themselves, but for future generations. That's why they invested so heavily in it. They were investing in machinery to make slave labor more efficient. They were investing in banks and financial institutions so that they could get lines of credit to expand their investments in slaves and in property and in machinery. If you look at this, especially from the perspective of the enslaved, it's hard to not see slavery, and not see plantation slavery, again, as an institution created and invested in to build wealth.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The idea that an enslaver could purchase an enslaved man, enslaved woman and encourage, induce, and sometimes force them to reproduce, means that every slave child itself was seen as a form of capital, right? A child that, if that child lived 15 or 20 or 30 years could produce so much wealth in terms of their labor, that it was seen as being a way to pass on wealth to future generations. Which is how, on the flip side, we see the fear that enslaved people had about their families being broken up, because by and large, they were seen as property and really seen as movable forms of capital that could be inherited by members of an enslavers' family.

Racism, capitalism, and slavery

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

If we look at the history of capitalism, especially in the American context, we are talking about this really fertile, really important period after the American Revolution, where these ideas about how to build, how to grow, how to really construct the American economy is still kind of evolving with ideas of race. And so in many ways, it is almost impossible to understand how capitalism evolves in the U.S. without understanding its connections to both race and slavery. In many ways, it was on the backs of slaves that capitalist ideas about how to grow wealth, how to build capital, began to develop and evolve. In many ways, it's hard to not talk about slavery in the late 18th and early 19th century without really understanding the relationship between capitalism and race, and again, capitalism and slavery.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I think it's about kind of the lens that we use, right? If we only look at these historical figures through one lens, perhaps through the lens of Lincoln as president or Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator," then we're kind of allowed to

not ask these other often uncomfortable questions about Lincoln's ideas about race, for example, or Lincoln's ideas about slavery and how they evolve. I think if we look at this period in American history, not through the lens of this great figure, such as Lincoln, but look at this period through the experiences of the enslaved, then we get a very different perspective on the politics of this period, the economics of this period, and just kind of daily life in 19th century America.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

One of the fundamental aspects of what a capitalist society possesses is the idea of constant productivity, constant generation of new ideas and innovations. And that applies to American slavery as well, as enslavers, again, began to adopt more strategic perspectives on how to manage their enslaved populations. Enslaved people were on the receiving end of more violent and coercive techniques that enslavers used to compel them to be more productive. From forcing them to harvest record amounts of cash crops, such as rice or cotton or sugar, to even inducing them to work more, saying that they would get liquor or sugar or coffee if they worked and produced more. So we are talking about a system that grew, a system that expanded, based on the increasing productivity of slaves. In many ways, again, it's hard not to see the relationship between the rise and emergence of American capitalism in the U.S. in the 19th century, and the ways in which as an institution became more and more productive, how it became more and more lucrative, but also became more violent as well.

White supremacy in America

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Well, I think I have to go back actually from the 19th century and go to really the 17th century in places like Virginia and Maryland. The idea of white supremacy is so embedded, not just in American capitalism, but really in American culture, writ large. There are studies that show that from the colonial period, the idea of Black slavery and the spread of Black slavery began to grow and rise with the ideas of white freedom, and so in many way ways, freedom, especially for white colonists and then white Americans, was predicated on the enslavement of Blacks. And so if that was such an important and visible part of American culture in the colonial period, then after the American Revolution, it becomes even more embedded as the United States begins to form itself into a nation.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so it is, again, impossible to untether and disconnect the idea of capitalism from white supremacy because it is so embedded in how this nation was founded, it is so embedded in American institutions, and it is really embedded, in many ways, in what American identity evolved to be, especially in the 19th century.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I think that even historians often like to separate the South from the North, saying that the South was just this bastion of violence and slavery and the North was this space of freedom, right? And while in some cases that was true, I think it's a false dichotomy. Because there were free Blacks in northern states who suffered great violence at the hands of white Americans. Free Blacks in the North were still subjected to not claiming citizenship rights. Free Blacks in the North were still living under the fear and threat of being kidnapped and being enslaved and sent to slave states. I think the narrative of Solomon Northup, *12 Years a Slave*, for example, is the most prominent example of that.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

But I do think that this idea of a genteel South and a free North is not really true because it supposes that free Blacks in the North could live completely free and that was not the case.

Daily life for the enslaved

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Enslavers were particularly adept at figuring out how to exploit the labor of slaves. And so a slave child might bring water or food to workers in a cotton field. A young enslaved woman might wait on an enslaver's child or an enslaver's wife. An enslaved boy might bring firewood to heat a fire for food that an enslaved person might use to cook. An enslaved woman in particular would be encouraged to do agricultural work in a rice or cotton or sugar field. Whereas an enslaved boy or man, of course, would be kind of forced, and encouraged in some instances, but really forced, to do a lot of the backbreaking work that we typically associate with plantation slavery. But interestingly enough, to old age, as well, older slaves were often forced to take care of slave babies.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so it was not an uncommon for an older enslaved woman to be a caretaker. Interestingly enough, though, if we look at the experiences of enslaved women, especially of child-bearing age, it was certainly not uncommon for enslaved women to serve as wet nurses to an enslaver's child, an enslaver's baby. And in fact, there were kind of networks of trade among enslavers to share wet nurses amongst themselves. So the idea that an

enslaved person's body was kind of used and exploited was really true, from childhood to old age.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Slave holders were taught from a very young age, how to interact with enslaved people. It was a kind of education that they learned. In some senses formally, such as the kind of education that they would get at the University of Virginia, kind of teaching the next generation of enslavers how to be masters. But young white women were taught as well, how to be mistresses. And so, this idea of white supremacy was instilled in white Americans who owned slaves from a very young age. On the flip side, that means that enslaved children were learning all of these messages about where they fit within American society and culture from a very young age, as well.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Even though enslavers used violence to compel and coerce slaves to be more productive, they also didn't always have to use violence to coerce slaves to be productive. They often used financial incentives and material incentives to induce bonds people towards higher levels of productivity and so, for example, it was not uncommon for enslavers in places like South Carolina, Louisiana and Georgia to lure with slaves with the promise of money.

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so enslaved men and women could work during their so-called free time to cultivate gardens, to build baskets, to do additional work and enslavers would compensate them, and so we're not, unfortunately, talking about large amounts of money. We're talking about cents, perhaps dollars. And so if we think about an enslaved man or woman making money during their extra time, we're talking about dollars at a time, and they were valued at being at

thousands of dollars at times, and so even though enslaved men and women could earn money for themselves, they could really never earn enough to buy their own freedom, and so they were kind of stuck in this cycle of doing extra work to just get things that they wanted. Goods such as hats, shoes, more durable clothing. It was not uncommon for them to try and purchase whiskey and liquor, or to purchase passes to see friends and family at neighboring plantations.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so enslavers figured this out and were using this lure of money to not just compel slaves to be more productive, but to lock them in a cycle where they would constantly be more productive, but never productive enough to purchase their own freedom.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Enslaved people were really kind of locked and stuck in a system that, again, profited off of their labor as the economy of slavery was kind of changing, shifting. So as enslavers continued to invest in new machinery to make the packing of cash crops, like cotton, more efficient, enslaved people, they just continued to be more productive, they continued to pick more cotton, to harvest more sugar. They continued to essentially produce more wealth while their quality of life continued to go down because of the demands on their bodies and their labor.

The lives of enslaved children

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The interesting part about exploring and really understanding the experiences of enslaved boys and girls is that it was not uncommon for them to actually play with the children of their enslavers. They would often play

together as children, come up with kind of games and keep one another company. But there comes a moment around the age of five or six or seven, when that dynamic changes dramatically. One of the more poignant examples of this is from the narrative of John Andrew Jackson. He talks about his life as a slave in South Carolina. And one of his youngest memories is of him playing with the son of his enslaver, and he talks about how they were playing and roughhousing, and he kind of physically dominated this young boy, and they would get into a fight, in a scuffle.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The boy runs to his mother with a bloody nose and tells his mother that he beat him up. So Jackson kind of faces the slave-holding mistress, and essentially, he gets beaten by her. And for him, it's this moment of kind of clarity, right? It's his first time when he realizes that, "No, my life and my experience is different than this white boy that I used to play with." For him, it's this kind of stark realization.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Interestingly enough, though, in one of the more poignant, and one of the more heartbreaking moments, in terms of really exploring the lives of a slave girl in particular, is from the narrative of Harriet Jacob. And she talks about how the life of an enslaved girl is just heartbreaking and challenging, because there comes a time in her life, in a young girl's life, when she goes through puberty, that she realizes that she might gain the attention of her enslaver, or of another white man who has power over her. And that experience is both traumatic, and it is just quite emotional in that she says that she fears for her own daughter, because she knows, intimately, what that experience is like.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

So the Fugitive Slave Act was a component of the Compromise of 1850. And part of this compromise was to basically placate the South. So what it did was that it mandated that all American citizens, everyone who lived in free states really were forced to give up fugitive slaves. They could not legally harbor fugitive slaves in these free states.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so what it meant was that free Blacks in the North who had been politically active in protecting free Blacks were therefore compelled by the federal government not to do so. And what it did was that it further ensured that enslavers in slave states could get their enslaved property back and that property right in human beings in runaway slaves was essentially protected by the federal government.

The Christiana Resistance of 1851

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

So this Christiana event in 1851 occurred the year after the Fugitive Slave Act was ratified. And it was an event in Pennsylvania, where William and Eliza Parker, they were free Blacks and they were in the habit of protecting runaway slaves and escaped slaves.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

This one incident occurred where an enslaver named Edward Gorsuch, he arrived in Pennsylvania from Maryland in search of his runaway slaves. William and Eliza Parker essentially confronted him and a skirmish ensued. They called out for their neighbors to come. Little did Gorsuch know that this

was a community, by and large a Quaker community that espoused variant anti-slavery beliefs.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so this biracial, white and Black community came and protected the Parkers and the slaves that they were harboring. This resulted in a violent skirmish between Gorsuch's men and the Parkers and the rest of this community, such that at the end of this very violent event, about 140 of the people involved were put on trial for treason. It was considered the biggest treason trial in American history. Ultimately 40 were charged and all 40 were found not guilty.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so it was seen by abolitionists as being this triumph against the tyranny of the pro-slavery interest in the U.S. Even Frederick Douglass remarked that this was this major turning point in pushing back against the horrors of the Fugitive Slave Act. But it was one of these moments that stands out in this period of a biracial coalition pushing back, led by the Parkers on this heinous Fugitive Slave Act that really rallied free Blacks in particular to get more politically involved than they had already been.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The Parkers did relocate to Canada after this 1851 incident. And it really does show that the Fugitive Slave Act really did threaten the lives of free Blacks such that yes, even though those involved in this event were found not guilty, it still did not mean that free Blacks were fully protected in the U.S. And so it is really interesting and remarkable that they ended up fleeing to Canada because it just shows the real threat that the act posed to free Blacks.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The Kansas-Nebraska Act looms very largely in the lead up to the Civil War. It was ratified in 1854, it was spearheaded by Lincoln opponent and Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas. And it proposed this: it proposed that both Kansas and Nebraska could come into the Union through this idea called popular sovereignty and so it essentially rendered null the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and it meant that the residents of this territory could decide for themselves whether slavery would be allowed or made illegal.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so this idea was called popular sovereignty and it was immediately a firestorm. It created this entire political climate of violence where slavery, again, was at the center. This is an instance when John Brown, the famed abolitionist moved to Kansas with his sons, trying to encourage residents of Kansas in particular to vote against slavery. But it created this tension where the residents of these territories had to decide for themselves whether slavery would be illegal there and it created this, again, violent environment where skirmishes and clashes between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions occurred. So it was really this flashpoint, especially in the 1850s, with regard to the political question of slavery.

The Dred Scott decision

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Dred Scott as a historical figure and the legal controversy around his case was perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back in terms of Black Americans, especially free Blacks, rallying against federal protections for slavery. And so

Dred Scott and his wife Harriet were taken by their enslaver in the 1840s from Missouri to Illinois and Wisconsin territory, which is now Minnesota. So they were taken there because their enslaver was a military doctor. They resided there for some time and then were taken back to Missouri.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

So at this time, Illinois was a free state and the Wisconsin territory had not been brought into the Union yet. Dred Scott decided to sue his enslaver for his freedom. Now, Missouri was very interesting in that local courts, in St. Louis in particular, were permitting slaves to file freedom suits and so they were kind of in this perfect environment where other slaves were suing for their own freedom, for their emancipation. They brought a suit to sue their enslaver for their freedom. They subsequently won that suit, it was returned by a higher court and it eventually went before the Supreme Court in 1857.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Roger Taney, essentially writes this decision that says that African-Americans were not to be considered citizens of the U.S., and this had ripple effects outside of just Dred Scott and his life. In particular, free Blacks in the North began to realize, with really stunning clarity, that their rights as free Blacks were not protected, that the federal government did not recognize them as being citizens and that their safety and security in the U.S. could not be secured. And so the Dred Scott decision was this moment of recognition and clarity for free Blacks, but it was also one of these moments that kind of built up towards the Civil War.

The politics of slavery in the 1850s

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The 1850s is this really pivotal decade in terms of the politics of slavery in particular, beginning in 1850 with the Fugitive Slave Act, which again, really charges up free Blacks and abolitionists in terms of their forcefulness within encouraging politicians and encouraging, really, white Americans to realize the threat of slavery. From, again, the Fugitive Slave Act to the Kansas-Nebraska Act to Bleeding Kansas, which is this violent skirmish which involves this question of popular sovereignty, to the increasing numbers of slaves who are attempting to flee to freedom.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

This decade in American history is just rife with political discord around slavery as this major stain, this major threat to American democracy and to the success of American society. And so the election of 1860 is really this turning point in terms of all of these problems, all of this violence, coming to ahead. And Democrats see the election of Lincoln as this major source of threat to the institution itself, the institution of slavery. Which is why after he is elected in December of 1860, South Carolina approves their declaration of secession, mentioning slavery as the reason for why they are leaving the Union.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

They thought that he was this anti-democratic figure who was going to completely upend their way of life. They believed, especially Southern Democrats, believed that Lincoln would completely destroy this institution that had been building the Southern economy for generations. And in many ways, interestingly enough, their worst fears came to fruition. Not through the ways that they thought that it would. But they really believed that Lincoln was a direct threat to their way of life – and interestingly in many ways he was.

Lincoln's evolving views on slavery & race

00:35:58:00

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Lincoln's ideas about slavery and about race did evolve over his lifetime. He was born in Kentucky, spent most of his early years in Illinois and he grew up, of course, knowing about slavery, perhaps being in the company of free Blacks, especially in Illinois. But he was in no way an abolitionist. He was not a supporter of completely ending slavery. If anything, we can say that he had anti-slavery sentiments, meaning that he opposed the spread of slavery, perhaps for political reasons. But he was not, for most of his life, of completely abolishing slavery.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

His ideas about the equality of Black people, again, really evolved, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation. I think it is important, and we should not underestimate the fact that he did request a private meeting with Frederick Douglass, who in the 1860s, was the most prominent American abolitionist. And so even though he was not a supporter of complete racial equality, I think we can say that his ideas about race and equality certainly evolved throughout the war.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Let's not forget that Lincoln was a politician, first and foremost, and his goal, especially during the war, was to bring the Confederacy back into the Union fold. And this question of slavery was such a hot button issue, even before his presidency, that Lincoln had a very clear sense of the stakes, of coming out in support of abolishing slavery versus taking a more moderate approach.

Now, that perspective changed with the Emancipation Proclamation. It was a really important political move, but it's also important to remember, it was a

military move, it was a military strategy to shift the momentum of the war in favor of the Union. And so even though we might be able to read some kind of moral meaning behind it, by and large, it was a political, but most importantly, it was a military move more than anything else.

The policy of colonization

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The idea of colonization, especially of free Blacks, predates Lincoln. It was an idea that was supported by Thomas Jefferson. He and other enslavers, while they may have held certain anti-slavery beliefs, their fears was of free Blacks and in particular, they were afraid of the influence of free Blacks on slave populations. And so in the 19th century, the American Colonization Society was founded. In 1817, this organization garnered widespread political support from men such as Thomas Jefferson and politicians such as Henry Clay of Kentucky.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so the ACS was an organization founded by and large to remove free Blacks from the U.S. and repopulate them in predominantly Black nations. The nation of Liberia was founded 1822, formed into a nation in 1847 and there was widespread financial and political support from the federal government for both the ACS and their founding of Liberia in West Africa. And so this idea of colonization was one that was, again, widely supported by many enslavers, but did not garner as much support from free Blacks. Many free Blacks felt that they were as much American as anyone else and they rejected the idea of being removed from the U.S. And so Lincoln's adoption of this idea of colonization kind of stems back to this broader fear of free Blacks and what free Blacks kind of meant for the spread of democracy.

In particular, Lincoln was really concerned with what slavery looked like on a global stage and he support colonization because he believed that slavery threatened American democracy and so by slowing kind of phasing out slavery and removing free Blacks, it would start to remove the stain from American society, and especially how the rest of world viewed American society from the outside in.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And then you can bring in Haiti and talk about how one of the regions where politicians were thinking about sending free Blacks was to Haiti and Haiti has this entire other history of, of course, being the first Black nation in the Western hemisphere, the second free nation that broke from colonial powers and so in many ways, men like Jefferson were really afraid of what Haiti represented, but after decades, Haiti became one of these places where politicians believed that free Blacks could thrive. So it's very interesting.

Frances Watkins Harper

00:42:19:00

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Frances Watkins Harper was a prominent abolitionist in the 19th century. She wrote quite publicly about her support, not just of the end of slavery, of ending slavery, but really of Black women's political participation in this movement. And so she stood as a very prominent, in many ways, a stark example of the challenges that not just African-Americans face, but the unique challenges that Black women faced under the systems of slavery and really within the structure of American society.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

She was really taking up the mantle of women, such as Phillis Wheatley, who did not have the same platform as she had of course. And she was serving in a

role that few Black women had the chance to serve in. Harper was, again, at the forefront of conversations about the abolitionist movement, about the political end to slavery, and practically what that would mean for the millions of slaves still in the U.S. And so in many ways, she was a foremother of the later political activism of Black women in the late 19th and early 20th century, especially around the idea of putting thought to paper, in terms of one's writings.

"Colonization will not remove the stain of slavery"

01:44:10:00

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

She kind of reiterates the fact that what Lincoln was doing with his colonization plan was an attempt to remove the stain of slavery without dealing with the real consequences of America's investment in slavery and slaves. And so it was a critique of this idea of colonization in that removing free Blacks will not remove the stain of slavery from the U.S. It's kind of a false choice, especially since most free Blacks didn't want to go.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I mean, especially for a free Black woman to take on the President in such a direct way and to criticize one of his plans and proposals in a really direct way. Again, kind of not dealing with the underlying problem, but just dealing with the surface residue of that problem, is really what she's getting at in terms of her critique of Lincoln.

Lincoln on the question of slavery at the cusp of his presidency

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

He must have seen a very interesting landscape of American life. Of course, traveling through both slave and non-slave states, and getting a sense of the reality of what the nation looked like upon his election. And too, I mean, he must have been thinking about the ways in which he would be called upon to really render a decision about the federal government's support of slavery in a way that perhaps no other President before him had been called to do. Slavery was so front and center in the election of 1860 that in many ways he was kind of compelled to be, or forced to be, a President that would render a final decision on whether slavery would continue to be part and parcel of American society.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And of course, he didn't know it then, but his legacy would stand around that question, would be built around that question. And so I imagine that he must've been really thinking about how he would deal with the slavery question. The question that the founders had kind of pushed off, because they didn't want to deal with, and he and his administration would have to.

So I do imagine whether Lincoln was thinking critically about how he would attack this question of slavery. If he would become more of an anti-slavery activist in his political leanings, or if he would more embrace this pro-slavery idea. And I wonder if Lincoln was really considering how he would approach these questions because slavery, as again a political question, had been so front and center in American politics in a way that he was really called on to give a final referendum on it. And he must have been thinking about the public perspective that he would take on this slavery question.

Reactions to Lincoln's moderate political approach

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Well, these types of acts that Lincoln, or was supporting in terms of, especially the, the First and Second Confiscation Acts during the war, he was clearly showing that he was towing the line, right? He was attempting to not really antagonize Confederate enslavers while still trying to maintain the momentum of the war in terms of the Union's military strategy.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

But what it did was it further really infuriated, especially free Blacks, but in particular, enslaved people who were just attempting to take their freedom. And so it proved to be, for Lincoln, I think it demonstrated his equivocation, again, on this question of slavery. But it really did infuriate Black Americans who were just attempting to, not just preserve, but to gain their freedom.

Ongoing resistance by enslaved people

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I think a fundamental part of the lives of enslaved people was this idea and really the reality of resistance. They attempted to resist and really undermined the bonds of slavery every day of their lives, whether it was implicit or explicit. They, of course, attempted to run away. They attempted to take their freedom for themselves. But they did small acts of resistance as well, in terms of breaking tools, running away for just short periods of time. In particular enslaved women did this– engage in what is called truancy. They would leave for a few days to get a physical distance from their plantations, and then come back. It was not uncommon for enslaved women in particular to try to control their fertility. And so the idea of enslaved women being the producers of the next generation of slaves, but the producers of the next generation of wealth for their enslavers as well was something that enslaved women thought a lot about. And so it was not uncommon for them to try to

control the one thing in their lives that they felt that they could, and it was their bodies.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

And so enslaved men and women resisted in a variety of ways. One could say that they formed relationships and bonds with one another, at times loving relationships, as a way to protect against the violence of slavery. And we could perhaps see that as a form of resistance as well.

Frederick Douglass & Lincoln

00:51:21:00

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Well, I think one of the most provocative parts of that relationship is the fact that he held so much prominence within the abolitionist movement that, again, he could get a private assembly, like a private meeting with Lincoln that was by and large unheard of, especially for a Black man at this period of time. And so it was remarkable that that Douglass could not only speak face to face in a very serious way with Lincoln and members of his cabinet as well, but that Lincoln took those conversations very seriously in terms of being courageous about the end of slavery and doing it with political and military means.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I mean, in many ways Frederick Douglass and Lincoln were exemplars in many ways of the aspirations of America, right? The fact that Douglass could be born a slave, he could himself escape and find a way to take his own freedom. The fact that he could create this public life for himself as an orator, as a writer. And the fact that on the other side, you have Lincoln who was born a very simple means ascending to the presidency, the pinnacle of political life in America. And the fact that they met one another to share their

ideas and butt heads, but in a really respectful way. I think it was really just extraordinary and in many ways, unprecedented as well.

The experience of Black soldiers in the Civil War

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

So Black soldiers in the Union military had experiences that people like Frederick Douglass believed were beneath their station. Oftentimes, it was not uncommon, especially when Blacks were first starting to enlist that they were essentially given the grunt work. And so their kind of level of service was not on par with their white counterparts. And it reflects this idea of Lincoln and the Union military perhaps not valuing their contributions as much as they perhaps should have or could have. But it was remarkable that especially Black men continued to enlist by the thousands, especially in 1863 and '64, in terms of their willingness and their recognition that they were essentially fighting for their freedom and the freedom of their families.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Black Union soldiers were very, very clear about what they were fighting for. They were fighting to free themselves and their family and fighting to destroy the institution of slavery. White Union soldiers were not as explicit perhaps about what the war meant for them. It was about reuniting the Union. And so it is interesting that the soldiers could fight side-by-side at times and be fighting for very, very, very different reasons.

Creating The Freedman's Bank

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I believe it was in 1864, or maybe early 1865, Frederick Douglass really encourages Lincoln to pay Black soldiers on par with their white counterparts. And Harriet Tubman starts to really petition the secretary of war to ratify this change in terms of Black men's pay. And so, interestingly enough, in 1865, one of Lincoln's kind of last political moves was to sign into law the Freedom and Savings and Trust Company, so-called the Freedman's bank. And it was a financial institution supported by the federal government established for recently emancipated Black Americans. And many of the first depositors were Union soldiers who were depositing their wages from the war into bank accounts. And so this is a very interesting moment of transition where you see a financial institution created essentially by the federal government and white philanthropists for the economic interest of the formerly enslaved and in particular, soldiers from the war.

How free Blacks and enslaved people impacted Lincoln

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

African-Americans were consistently challenging Lincoln both directly and indirectly to think critically about, really what the war was about. For the almost 4 million enslaved people in the U.S the war was by and large about slavery. For the numbers of free Blacks and free states, the war was certainly not just about slavery, but about their own rights as non-citizens, and really was about citizenship and its relationship to slavery. And the thousands of African-Americans who were flooding Union lines really wanting, not just protection, but to fight, did push Lincoln to think critically about the ideological underpinnings of the war, which more and more turned out to be about the future of slavery in the nation.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Well, I think what it did was that it encouraged Lincoln to be more strategic and be more forceful in politically abolishing slavery or supporting an amendment, perhaps that would officially abolish slavery. The fact that thousands of Black men were fighting and dying for this cause, and really were willing to. And in addition, the fact that thousands of slaves, slave men and women were fleeing to Union lines was remarkable. Such that, Union camps could not handle the numbers of slaves fleeing for their freedom. And so these dual influences really did change the way that Lincoln thought, not just about slavery, but about kind of what the war was about, what they were fighting for in terms of the Union against the Confederacy.

The politics of Lincoln's assassination

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Enslavers were- they were not entirely, I think, surprised. If anything, they I think hoped that the assassination would bring back perhaps a sense of normalcy, a sense of bringing back their property and re-instilling and re-establishing slavery as the dominant institution. Certainly Democrats saw the assassination as being this political moment of instability in many ways, perhaps a chance to shift, not just the political momentum, but the national conversation about slavery. But I think importantly for African-Americans, I think it was a sense of fear. Fear that all that they had fought for, all that they had run for would be lost. And so there was, especially among African Americans, the sense of insecurity about the larger implications of his assassination.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Lincoln's assassination certainly changed not just the conversation about slavery, but the conversation about the political life of the nation. It was such

a stark and violent end to such a violent war that I think it brought much of the nation to a halt, really thinking about the role, not just of violence, but of racial violence too in the nation, that this was this moment of just such instability. And so it's affects continued to linger, especially in terms of African Americans, especially former slaves in terms of really understanding or trying to understand, not just the role of violence, but kind of their place in this nation. And so his assassination loomed quite largely, especially for former slaves, many of whom did see him as the "great emancipator," see him as being the person who by and large kind of guided the nation out of slavery into this period of emancipation.

John Brown was also a product of his time

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I tend to be very skeptical when people say that certain historical figures are "a product of their time." I often think people use that term to try to justify violence and discrimination and exploitation.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Lincoln for example, was a man of his time. But another man of his time was John Brown, someone who was a staunch abolitionist, someone who I think we can really say was a supporter of racial equality. He was very forthcoming about his very, what we would call anti-racist ideas. And he actually used the Bible to support these ideas. And so he is a really interesting historical figure. Again, a contemporary of Lincoln, a friend and compatriot of Frederick Douglass, and someone who was willing to give his life for the end of slavery and for racial equality in a way that I think few historical figures who are white had done.

How the ideas and institutions based on slavery endure today

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

Slavery in America has not really ended. We just have to look at the 13th amendment. And yes, it ended an institution that we would consider as being slavery, but there is a caveat there in terms of being convicted and found guilty of a crime. And so in many ways, yes, the plantation slavery that we typically associated slavery really no longer exists here. But one could say that the prison industrial complex is a form of slavery that has metastasized, and that has kind of grown underneath our noses, using this loophole in the 13th amendment to by and large incarcerate a wide swath of African American society.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

The continued problems in American society of white supremacy and of discrimination stem from this period in American history, stem from the struggles of enslaved men and women to create fully formed lives for themselves and their families under the horrors and violence of slavery. And in many ways, that really fuels me in my research. I'm interested in studying how enslaved men and women simply survived under a system that thrived off of extracting as much from them as possible. I think it's an important story to be told because it was on their backs on which this nation was built. It was because of their blood, their labor, their bodies, and their lives on which many parts of American society grew and thrived. And I think that that's a really important story to tell. And I think it helps us really understand just this really important moment in American history, an entire war was fought over the future and the legacy of slavery. And so I think fully illuminating the lives of the enslaved does a good job of helping to explain, again, this pivotal part in American history and perhaps American life today.

Moral complexity in history

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JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I think it is important to, on the one hand, understand historical figures such as Lincoln in terms of the times in which they lived. I think at the same time, it's not our job to excuse their moral failings. It's to add complexity to a human being that dealt with a wide variety of influences, whose ideas about race and slavery evolved over his lifetime. To understand who he interacted with and how those interactions took place, I think is a really important part of an understanding, not just this history, but the historical figures that created it. And Lincoln is no exception.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I think that that is America's original sin. The fact that it was founded on ideas of freedom, of liberty, of justice. And those ideas were enshrined in founding documents while at the same time the creators of those documents held people of African descent in bondage and profited off of those investments in bondage and in slavery.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I think that this is the fundamental American dilemma, that a part of, I think, being an American citizen is critiquing and debating and criticizing and at times embracing, but being very critical of this original sin. The idea that this nation founded on these lofty ideas will never fully live up to them because of this history. Slavery is an indelible stain that has saturated so many parts of American life, that in many ways, it's hard to separate from how we see America today.

JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS:

I think part of being an American citizen is critiquing the system under which we live. The founders surely did it with one another. And in many ways it makes our democracy run. And so, I think it's a crucial part of American life and American citizenship.

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