CHRISTOPHER BONNER
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Christopher Bonner Interview
12-07-2020
Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
Total Running Time: 01:10:56

START TC: 00:00:00:00

CREW MEMBER:

Dr. Chris Bonner interview, take one. Mark.

JACKIE OLIVE:

Okay Dr. Bonner…

Slavery and the American economy

01:00:15:04

CHRIS BONNER:

Slavery was absolutely essential to the U.S. economy in the first half of the 19th Century. And there are some interesting ways to think about this. One of the things that I think is striking is to think about the fact that the South was not really doing a lot of industrial production for themselves. And what it did then, was sort of become a domestic market for Northern manufacturers. And one of the really, I think stunning examples of this is what was called slave cloth. Essentially, cotton that was produced in the South would be shipped to factories in the North, and then woven into this cheap and durable cotton clothing, that would be sold back to the South and worn by enslaved people. And so you can see that basically the way that the

economy worked was this sort of cycle surrounding cotton production and manufacture. And there's this, I mean, stunning image, I think of enslaved people wearing the product of their own labor that was produced in Northern factories.

Northern complicity in slavery

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CHRIS BONNER:

Yeah. There's a way to think about the North as implicated, but I think even more than that, I think that we can see that Northern states were instrumental to the national economy that was sort of centered around the production of slave products like cotton. There was no way to really divide the North and the South economically because of how closely integrated they were.

Inconsistencies in our founding documents

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CHRIS BONNER:

There's a way to think about the history of the United States from its founding as paradoxical. That this was a nation in which slavery survived, even though it had been predicated on and created through ideas of freedom or liberty. And you know, there's a strange parallel, I think between the image of someone like Thomas Jefferson writing the declaration of independence and at the same time, owning dozens, or perhaps even hundreds at that point, of enslaved people. At the same time, I think that there's something in the Constitution that's different from, or more

than paradoxical. There's a kind of inconsistency in the Constitution. On the one hand, the Constitution was expressing these broad principles of natural rights to liberty, and demand that the government should promote justice and protect the sort of general welfare.

CHRIS BONNER:

But at the same time, the Constitution included protections for slave owners to have their fugitive enslaved people returned to them. It included a provision that ensured that the slave trade, the Atlantic slave trade would not be eliminated in the U.S. until at least 1807, 1808. There's a way in which the Constitution was fundamentally inconsistent on the question of slavery. It was, on the one hand, suggesting that slavery was anathema to these national principles. But at the same time, it was creating structures that would ensure the survival and really the thriving of slavery as an economic and a social system. So it's not quite paradoxical. I think it's just that the document was inconsistent.

The daily life of the enslaved

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CHRIS BONNER:

Enslaved people lived.. I think the phrase enslaved *people* is actually really important for understanding their lives. They lived like people, to the extent that people could in the circumstances of bondage. We know that enslaved people had robust family connections, that they created complex communities, and that there were social hierarchies sometimes tied to ancestry. If someone is descended from a really well-respected member of a community, sometimes tied to occupation. If someone has a skill, you know, the enslaved person, Gabriel, who was owned in Richmond,

Virginia in the early 19th Century, was a blacksmith. And before he developed this conspiracy to try to rise up and free himself and other enslaved people in 1800, he was sort of understood as a respected member of his community. In part, because of that skill. And so, he was a person of not only skill, but also apparently it seems to have been a person of charisma. And so there are ways to think about how a person attained status, that I think look a lot like things that we're familiar with. Again, it's really key to think about Gabriel as a person who was held in bondage, rather than a slave. And I think that that gives us a sense of not only the complexity of individual enslaved people, but the circumstances and the communities in which they were living.

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CHRIS BONNER:

Enslaved people were essentially compelled to work for their lives. The purposes of their enslavement was to force them through violence, to do work that would enrich slave owners. We have some really good and vivid accounts of the work of a plantation. One of the- most of it, I think actually comes from Solomon Northup's narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*. Northup was born free and tricked and kidnapped into bondage. And he worked in various forms of labor in the South, in the 1840s and early 1850s. And one of the things that Northup tells us is about the structures of cotton production, of labor on a cotton plantation. Northup describes the order of a plantation, that the crops were laid out in these really rigid and clearly defined rows. And enslaved people were lined up and made to move down these rows.

CHRIS BONNER:

In addition to that kind of geographic structure, there are overseers who were sitting up on horseback above the enslaved people. And that gives them a vantage, that allows them to look down and watch the progress to make sure that people are moving across the field. And then on top of that, what Northup describes is what he

says is the sort of constant sound of the whip flying through the air, and cracking, and whistling and compelling enslaved people to keep pace. And so there's this structure of supervision that's visible there. And also, the structure of violence that undergirds that structure of supervision. One of the things that I think is kind of fascinating about what Northup tells us, is that you can see how much work slave owners and overseers were doing to compel enslaved people to do their labor. But I think you can also see that all of that work was necessary, because enslaved people were always pushing back. They were always contesting the terms of their labor. They were always trying to shape the ways that they worked on a day-to-day basis. There was never a simple process of forcing enslaved people to work. There was always violence imposed by slave owners, and there was always strategizing on the part of enslaved people to try to shape the terms of their work.

Enslaved people's resistance to enslavement

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the first things that I'm thinking about in terms of how slave owners tried to compel labor, and how enslaved people tried to sort of work against it: in cotton producing regions, slave owners would regularly require enslaved people to pick a certain weight of cotton each day. And they would weigh it at the end of the day in order to make sure that people were as productive as they were expected to be.

CHRIS BONNER:

There are incidents or there's evidence of enslaved people putting rocks and pebbles in their bags, in order to try to increase the weight. There's evidence of enslaved people sharing the fruits of their labor, and sort of shifting some cotton from their

sack to a friend's sack, or a neighbor's sack, or a family member's sack in order to try to sort of make up that kind of- any sort of deficit in their burden. So there's not just a way of seeing power imposed by slave owners, but there's also a way of seeing enslaved people sort of cultivating their own kinds of power.

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think another way to see slave owner's controls and enslaved people sort of challenging those controls, is in the landscape of the plantation. So fundamentally slavery was about making a person be in a particular place in order to do work. And so slave owners were really anxious and really invested in trying to ensure that they knew where enslaved people were, and that they could keep them in a particular space. But enslaved people regularly sort of violated those boundaries that slave owners were trying to create or construct. And one of the practices that I think is really striking is what historians have defined as truancy, or described as truancy. Enslaved people would go to the woods and hide out for a few days or maybe even a few weeks. And then eventually they would come back to a plantation and they would be punished brutally.

CHRIS BONNER:

So in this process, like these are not enslaved people who are getting free or enslaved people who are attacking the institution of slavery, but these are enslaved people who are finding a couple of weeks where they don't have to pick cotton, finding a couple of weeks where they don't have to worry about being abused by a slave owner. Even with the knowledge of the punishment that would come, they were willing to take the risk of leaving for a few days, or a few weeks, or even a few hours just to feel that kind of momentary liberation.

Enslavers' use of technology to assert power

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CHRIS BONNER:

There's a lot of ways to think about how technology worked for slave owners in the South. And the cotton gin was an invention that essentially solved one of the problems of cotton production. It allowed slave owners to force more enslaved people to produce more cotton, because it was easier to clean that cotton, to separate the seeds from the fiber. The seeds were trashed, the fiber was the valuable stuff. And so that solved one of the problems of productivity. But I think there are other kinds of technologies at play. So an overseer on horseback who can watch more enslaved people work because of that vantage point, that's a kind of natural technology that's being deployed. The dogs that were used as tools for slave hunters and slave patrols, that's another way to think about slave owners deploying technology to sort of shift the balance of power. I think that there are interesting ways to think about the complexities of the tools that slave owners were trying to deploy, really to advance the bottom line.

The Second Middle Passage

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CHRIS BONNER:

In the early 19th century, essentially slavery moved from a concentration in upper South states, like Virginia and North Carolina and Maryland, into deep South cotton producing territory, states like Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. And there are a lot of ways to think about the sort of metrics of this movement. So what historians

have come to call the Second Middle Passage, the massive shift of enslaved people from the upper South to the lower South, it's estimated that about a million people were transferred from those upper South states into the cotton producing regions in the decades of the early 19th century.

CHRIS BONNER:

There are other ways to think about the sort of– the toll of this. There's an estimate that from about 1830 to 1860, there were two million sales of enslaved people across the South. Some of those people were moved, some of them were just transported or transferred between neighbors. But when that is broken down sort of minute by minute, there's a way to think about this as an enslaved person being sold about every three minutes in the Antebellum Period in the South.

CHRIS BONNER:

And we can think about that as, I think there's also estimates that suggest that about half of all enslaved people's marriages were broken up by either sale or transfer during the Second Middle Passage. And so there's a way to think about this movement, like the larger Middle Passage in the Atlantic world, solely on the basis of numbers. And those numbers are horrific, the idea that two million people were sold, is horrifying. But I think it becomes even more horrific and more real when you think about the fact that one person every three minutes was separated from the world that they knew. Whether that be their home, their family, their husband, or wife, whatever it might be, I think that there's a way to humanize those numbers that I think makes it even more disturbing.

The indignities of the coffle

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CHRIS BONNER:

So enslaved people would have been bound together in a coffle, which was essentially a group of captive people, either chained or tied together and made to walk for miles. They would have walked dozens of miles a day from the upper South to the lower South. And Charles Ball is one example of this. Ball was sold in Maryland and transported through South Carolina and on to Georgia. And so he spent months of his life forcibly bound to another person and walking through the South. Again, there's this sort of large-scale horror of that idea, but then there are also more mundane cruelties and brutalities of what that would have meant.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so a person like Charles Ball, who was bound together to another in a coffle, would have had no privacy. So when that person needs to use the bathroom, they go with the person to whom they are chained. When that person is tired and wants to lie down to sleep, they may not have the space to actually lie down and feel any sort of comfort in order to rest. And so it's compounding that kind of indignity and brutality, is compounding just the basic difficulty of being made to walk so far in order to be compelled to work.

CHRIS BONNER:

So typically in a coffle, enslaved men would have been bound together with chains and iron manacles. And there was a fear that they were more likely to rebel or more dangerous if they were to try to rise up and behind the men would have been a line of women who were sort of tied together with rope and they were seen as less likely, less threatening to the slave owners and the slave traders who were leading the men and women into the South. And so there are different ways that you can see gender play out in terms of the power and the structures of slavery and really slave trading, when you see the men and the chains and the women in the ropes in the coffle.

How the Second Middle Passage worked

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CHRIS BONNER:
One of the ways that the Second Middle Passage worked, a lot of people were transported across land in a coffle, a lot of people were boarded onto a ship in a place like Baltimore and sold- or moved around the coast of the country to a port like New Orleans. And so there's this really horrifying reality that enslaved people who might have heard stories about the horror of the original middle passage, people boarded onto ships in West Africa and transported to the Americas, those people would have been told, "Here, get onto a ship in Baltimore," and they would have no idea where they're going, they would have no idea how long or how frightening that journey would be, how difficult that journey would be. And so there's a weird parallel when you think about people who were transported by water in the domestic slave trade in the United States to think about what it would have meant to them to confront the uncertainty of a maritime journey, knowing what they might've known about how their ancestors had suffered through that kind of journey.

The slave trade as a unifying force in the South

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CHRIS BONNER:

In a way that's parallel to the fact that cotton production knit together the U.S. economy North and South, the domestic slave trade knit together the South as a region. There were slave sellers in Baltimore who had robust relationships with

slave buyers in New Orleans. There were people, white slave traders and slave owners moving through the South, alongside the enslaved people that they were trading. If you look at a sort of map or you envision a map of frequently traveled routes for slave traders in the domestic slave trade, you can see the fabric of the South being woven together as people are invested in economic developments across the region, and people are sort of connecting with one another through the prospects of buying and selling and moving people in the Antebellum Period.

Understanding the role of slavery in the US to understand Lincoln

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CHRIS BONNER:

When you think about things like the centrality of slavery to the U.S. economy, or when you think about things like the extent of the domestic slave trade and how much of a big business slave trading was in the Antebellum Period, what you see is how fundamental slavery was to so many people's lives in the United States. Slavery was the foundation of many white Southerners dreams of wealth. It was the foundation of many white Southerners' dreams of prosperity. And so the idea or the fear that white Southerners develop that Abraham Lincoln, as President, would attack slavery, it becomes a sort of existential fear. It kind of helps to make sense of the, what I think is really irrational and rash decision to secede from the Union. It helps us to sort of understand that decision because we can see how important slavery was to white Southerners, that they might worry so much about the idea of President Lincoln, of a president from a Republican Party, which was a ostensibly anti-slavery

The distinctions between abolitionism and anti-slavery

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CHRIS BONNER:

Radical abolitionism really begins to flourish in the 1830s. And the- one of the sort of leading figures in this movement is William Lloyd Garrison, who publishes a newspaper called *The Liberator*, which essentially says, "Slavery must end now, there is no compromise with slavery with slave owners. The institution is evil and we have to free ourselves from it as a nation." And this sort of doctrine flourishes through a combination of like high philosophical arguments in the writings of people like Garrison and more concrete and vivid stories of slavery that are coming from the pens and from the lives of fugitive slaves and writers of slave narratives. People like Frederick Douglass, people like Solomon Northup, people like Charles Ball, who are able to offer really vivid stories of what it was like to live amidst the horrors of slavery. More and more, these kinds of ideas are being broadcast about slavery's injustice.

CHRIS BONNER:

Abraham Lincoln comes into this context of anti-slavery from the fringes. He was a person who was, really throughout his early political career, conscious of distancing himself from radical abolitionists. He was conscious of saying that I am not a person who wants to eradicate slavery everywhere, or who feels like it needs to be eliminated everywhere. What Lincoln's philosophy was is that slavery was problematic to the freedom of white Northerners; that the expansion of slavery was threatening to an ideal of agrarian freedom for, you know, small farming folks like his family in Illinois. And so Lincoln's whole philosophy is that we should restrict

slavery, we should try to keep it confined to the places where it exists, we should try to find ways to make sure that it doesn't continue to expand into the new territory.

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CHRIS BONNER:

And so there's a complexity to anti-slavery in the North, and I think it's also really important to distinguish between anti-slavery, which was Lincoln's sort of opposition to the spread of the institution and abolitionism, which was the philosophy of someone like William Lloyd Garrison or Frederick Douglass, that slavery is evil and must end. Anti-slavery is the broad umbrella of opposition to the institution. But there's a difference between that and the concrete work that people were doing to try to eradicate it everywhere.

The Rebulican Party's anti-slavery stance

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CHRIS BONNER:

The Republican party was a paragon, I think in some ways, of this kind of moderate anti-slavery. Their concern was preventing the spread of slavery, the expansion of slavery into territories where it didn't exist. And their concern was really the ideology of free labor, the concept that free working men were the best, were the ideal citizens for the United States. And so Lincoln comes to be a sort of major figure, a major advocate for that free labor vision and for the Republican Party's brand of moderate anti-slavery because he's really conscious of finding the balance between pro-slavery like a radical pro-slavery position and a radical abolitionist position. He

cultivates this idea of a future in which people are able to live freely in the North and continue to own slaves in the South if that's what they choose to do.

CHRIS BONNER:

He cultivates this position in part because it's his conviction that that's what's legally required under the constitution. There is no power in the federal government to end slavery where it already exists. And so what can be done is to try to ensure that states and new territories can limit the spread of slavery into new spaces. And so he strikes this really, I think really careful, moderate balance that makes it possible for him to come to prominence within the Republican Party.

Southern white response to Lincoln and the Republicans

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CHRIS BONNER:

The fears of white Southerners were represented in a lot of ways in the calling, or the naming of Lincoln and others as "Black Republicans," and this was a consciously racist claim. The fear that white Southerners were playing on was that the Republican Party was not anti-slavery as they said, but they were abolitionists, that they wanted the immediate end of slavery. And with that, or alongside the end of slavery, what white Southerners said was that Republicans and Lincoln wanted what was often called amalgamation. They wanted social equality, they wanted Black and white people to share the same spaces, to marry, to have sexual relationships, whatever that might entail. And so there's this anxiety that white Southerners were playing on that was trying to convince voters across the country that Lincoln and the Republicans wanted to eradicate the racial order. And Lincoln was insisting that his project was again, to limit slavery where it existed, but white Southerners were

trying to cultivate this image of Lincoln as not only an abolitionist, but what they would have called an amalgamationist.

The Fugitive Slave Act and its political effects

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that happens in the 1850s is that there is this sort of series of controversies surrounding fugitive slaves, or alleged fugitive slaves. There are incidents where enslaved people were found or apprehended in the Northern States and there was violent resistance on the part of abolitionists, Black and white, to the recapture of these fugitive slaves. And one of the most notable examples of this is the case of Anthony Burns in Boston in 1854. So Burns is apprehended and brought to trial. And in the midst of the trial, there is a group of Black and white abolitionists who try to violently liberate Burns from the slave catchers, the kidnappers as they would have understood them. In the process of this, the struggle that ensues, one of the kidnappers, one of the slave catchers is killed. And so it becomes a sort of national crisis that a Southern representative is being killed by a Northerner in a fight over slavery in Boston, this is really troubling for a lot of people in the United States.

CHRIS BONNER:

But part of what's really interesting about Anthony Burns' case is that, in the end, Burns is ruled to be a fugitive slave and sent back to the South. But in the sending him back, there are thousands of troops brought out to essentially escort him from the North to the South. And as the troops are marching out of Boston, there are people lining the streets in a sort of, like, quiet protest or like a show of their

opposition to what's happening. And so you can see some of the intensification of conflict over slavery as early as the mid 1840s, in a place like Boston that is very distant from, you know, the centers of slavery, but is, in a way, really close to the history of revolutionary politics in the U.S.

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that's really interesting is that, you know, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 intensifies anxieties in Northern communities and it leads to tensions and events like those surrounding Anthony Burns in Boston. But Black folks didn't need the Fugitive Slave Act to know that their freedom was precarious and that they needed to defend their freedom, sometimes with violence. There's a story of a man named Adam Crosswhite and his family, who were fugitive slaves, who had settled in Michigan and were eventually sort of tracked down in their community by their owners and by slave catchers. And in the moment that these slave catchers try to apprehend the Crosswhite family, there is this sort of gathering of Black and white abolitionists from their neighborhood who come together and surround the slave catchers and threaten them. They are wielding clubs, and they basically say, "You will not take the Crosswhites without a fight." And in the process, in the sort of chaos that ensues, Adam Crosswhite and his family are able to escape and they're led into freedom in Canada. And so there's this moment where you can see, like a real direct confrontation and a show of strength on the part of Black Northerners and a recognition that violence, or at least the threat of violence might be necessary.

CHRIS BONNER:

And there's also, I think, there's a moment that happens after the Crosswhites make it to Detroit, where one of the white abolitionists, who was involved in the mob, confronts one of the slave catchers in jail. And he says, the court record suggests that this white abolitionist essentially says, "Your Negroes are gone." And he's sort of like

gloating, like mocking this slave owner in this moment that the people that you're trying to get are out of your reach. And so you can kind of see in this case that Black folks knew that their freedom was tenuous and that they had been cultivating, before the Fugitive Slave Act, they'd been cultivating networks of support, networks of self-defense that would enable them to ensure their freedom. And so those kinds of networks are, I don't even want to say being revived, they're being redeployed in the 1850s in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act. But these are practices that were years, if not decades old, by the time of things like the Anthony Burns incident.

Vigilance Committees

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CHRIS BONNER:

Across the Northern states, there were organizations sometimes called Vigilance Committees, where there were really formal structures for Black folks to defend themselves and abolitionists to defend Black folks from kidnappers. And there are really interesting little records, there's a source that is a sort of diagram with numbers on it that is designed to sort of train Black and white Northerners how to position themselves to surround a kidnapper or a slave catcher. So this is kind of like instructional material, that's like, "This is what you do in order to make sure that you can remain free."

CHRIS BONNER:

There's also, I think, alongside the kind of formal structural stuff, like the literature and the practices of a group, like a Vigilance Committee, I think there are more sort of informal and casual things that are circulated. There are newspaper advertisements, I guess I'll call it an advertisement, produced in the 1850s that

essentially say, "Watch out, there are slave catchers, kidnappers who are notorious, who we've seen walking the streets of New York or walking the streets of Philadelphia, be on your guard." And so there's a combination of like really formal and structured and more informal, just like calls for Black people to be wary, to be on their guard against the prospect of kidnap.

The Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the question of slavery's expansion

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CHRIS BONNER:

So the Missouri Compromise was supposed to be a settlement of the slavery question. It was supposed to say that slavery would proceed or would continue to expand on a sort of divided North-South basis, that it would be confined to a certain part of the Union. And the Kansas-Nebraska Act was a, from the perspective of many white Northerners, it was a betrayal of that principle. It was an implementation of this idea of popular sovereignty – that the people in a territory would be able to decide whether it was slave or free. And so theoretically, under the doctrine of popular sovereignty, slavery could exist in Kansas, it could exist in Nebraska and it could exist as far North and West as the nation might expand if enough voters would support it.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that's actually really interesting about Kansas-Nebraska is the way that the theory of popular sovereignty led to this kind of popular violence that theoretically, if one side could have more voters than the other, then they could determine the future of slavery in that space. And so the outbreaks of violence and what comes to be called Bleeding Kansas, these are a direct result of the idea that

people should be able to vote about slavery in their territories. And so, as worrying, I think, as the violence of a place like Kansas was to Republican Party leaders, one of the things that I think was particularly upsetting for people like Lincoln was the idea that slavery might go wherever it could. The idea that slavery could no longer be bound under the terms of the Missouri Compromise. And so it was really worrying for white Northerners to think about the prospect of slavery being voted into existence up to the Northern border of the United States.

John Brown, Dangerfield Newbie, and the human toll of fighting against slavery

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CHRIS BONNER:

John Brown is a kind of singular figure. We know that a lot of radical white abolitionists, people like William Lloyd Garrison, were influenced and inspired by the stories of Black abolitionists and by the arguments of Black abolitionists. John Brown, while he was certainly aware of, and in conversation with Black abolitionists, he was also, I think, a person who cultivated this deep internal hatred of slavery. Frederick Douglass said in a speech long after Brown's death, Douglass said that he had never known a person who was so agitated by just hearing or thinking or talking about slavery, that Brown would pace the floor and show, you know, that he had this sort of deep well of energy that was inspiring his desire to challenge slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

Brown was, I think, a deeply committed hater of the institution of slavery. So, you know, he started his work in Kansas and really became a leading figure in some of the violence of Bleeding Kansas. He and his sons killing a number of pro-slavery settlers and then going on the run. So he lived much of the later part of his life as a

fugitive. His most notable activity was the raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859. Brown led a few dozen men, including several of his sons, a number of Black men and white men, some of whom were fugitive slaves on this daring, some might said ill-advised, mission to try to invade the South and create, theoretically, it was supposed to create an army of fugitive slaves to help liberate other enslaved people across the South, and sort of attack plantations and make slave owners feel endangered.

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think that John Brown went to Harpers Ferry to make himself a martyr. And he succeeded in that regard. It's really notable that he had these sort of grand ideas about creating an army of liberation, but once he got to Harpers Ferry, he took the arsenal and he sort of just sat there and waited until he was surrounded by Southern and Southern militia and U.S. troops and eventually captured and executed.

CHRIS BONNER:

I think that Brown recognized that he could be a powerful symbol of a white person who was willing to die to fight slavery. And he was. And one of the things that I think is really interesting about Brown in terms of his- what he meant to American people in this context is that Brown sort of became like a ghost story. White southerners would invoke this specter of John Brown, this idea that all abolitionists, all anti-slavery people were potential invaders, potential attackers of the South. And so he really in some ways sort of armed white Southerners with this incident that showed the horrific dangers of anti-slavery fanaticism.

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CHRIS BONNER:

When we think about John Brown, it's also really important to think about some of the people who went with him to Harpers Ferry. And one of the people who I think is

most notable in that regard is Dangerfield Newby. So Dangerfield Newby was a fugitive slave from Virginia who was with John Brown and was carrying with him a letter from his wife, Harriet. Harriet Newby was still enslaved in Virginia. And in this letter essentially said to her husband, "Dangerfield come and get me. Our owner is broke and he's going to sell me, and I don't know when he's going to sell me. And so you may not be able to find me if you don't come soon."

CHRIS BONNER:

Dangerfield Newby then, I think we have to see him as a person who went to Harpers Ferry thinking about more than just that raid. Thinking about the possibility that he might have been able to go deeper into Virginia and find and free his wife. But Dangerfield Newby was one of the first people to die at Harpers Ferry during the raid. And so if John Brown wanted to make himself a martyr, I think that it's important to think about the fact that some of the people who were with him probably didn't. They might've had more concrete goals, more tangible people in mind, who they hoped to free. And so I think Newby's story is a story about the costs and the toll, the human toll of a fight that we can all agree is noble, the fight against slavery, but the dangerous dimensions of that kind of struggle.

The "fancy trade" and sexual exploitation of enslaved women

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CHRIS BONNER:

So one of the dimensions of slavery and slave trading that may not be familiar to a lot of people is what was called in some cases the 'fancy trade.' It was the buying and selling of enslaved women particularly for sexual purposes. And part of this was the valuation of women with certain traits. Many of them were fairer-skinned women,

women who were of mixed racial parentage. The functioning of this trade was to, I guess, satisfy in another way the many desires of wealthy and powerful white Southerners. I think that the existence of this trade is a reflection of what slavery actually meant to slave owners and enslaved people. It was an institution defined by the possession of a person's body and all of what that meant. And so it's part of how we can see some of the horrors of what slavery involved.

CHRIS BONNER:

There's a story that I talk about with my students a lot of an enslaved woman named Bethany Veney who wrote about her experiences in bondage after slavery ended. And what Veney describes is being brought to a slave market in Richmond that was essentially a fancy market and figuring out... What's remarkable about Veney is that she figured out and sort of gathered knowledge from other women about how to dodge her sale in this moment. And so she put something on her tongue that makes it look, she says feverish. So she looks sort of unattractive in that way. When people ask her questions, she responds rudely. She tries to act in general like a person who was not going to be compliant. And so there's a way to think about that as a kind of reflection of maybe like the limited power that enslaved people in, and particularly in this case, enslaved women might have been able to cultivate. Veney didn't free herself. Veney didn't necessarily prevent herself from being sold at another day. But in that moment, in that time, she was able to sort of call on reservoirs of Black knowledge to try to challenge this really horrific dimension of slavery.

Freedom lawsuits

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CHRIS BONNER:

We know that enslaved people figured out how the law worked and that they tried to use the law to their advantage in a lot of cases. And one of the fundamental reasons for this is that slavery was a legal institution. Enslaved people in a place like Missouri knew that they were owned because the law said that they were owned. And so they tried to figure out how to use the law to their advantage. And one of the things that happens, especially in what's now the Midwest, as enslaved people are moved and transported between slave states and free states or free territories, they recognize the power of being in a place where slavery is not legal. And so that movement becomes the foundation for their claims to freedom. And so you can see here another piece of the kinds of... like one of the tools that enslaved people were reaching for to try to secure some kind of liberty. I think it's one of a, you know, a massive kit of tools that enslaved people were able to try to sort of deploy in their own interests.

The Dred Scott decision

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CHRIS BONNER:

Dred Scott was an enslaved person in Missouri who sued for his freedom because he had gone to various free states and free territories at the command of his owner. And the case went to the Supreme Court and ultimately Chief Justice Roger Taney, in an effort to try to make various definitive statements about the future of slavery, Taney said that Dred Scott, one, could not sue in federal court. Two, even if he could, going to a free state wouldn't actually free an enslaved person. And Taney also said that the federal government had no power to restrict slavery, to restrict slave owners from bringing enslaved people wherever they wanted to bring them. And so, part of what Taney does is say that Dred Scott can't sue because Dred Scott is not a citizen, and

that no Black person could be a citizen. And Taney does this weird sort of constitutional interpretive move, where he says that at the time that the constitution was framed, Black people had no rights which white men were bound to respect.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so that's Taney's most infamous claim. And it's actually a claim about history and it's not really accurate. We know that there are various places, including New York state, among many others, where Black men voted, where Black men had various legal rights in the late 18th century, and in the early 19th century. One of the things Taney wants to do is to try to prevent people like Dred Scott from suing for freedom. He is trying to cut off that avenue to legal advocacy or to individual or collective change on the part of Black folks.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the other things Taney wants to do is to really define slavery as national. He's trying to say that... And he says, based on the constitution's protection of property rights, no one can restrict a slave owner from bringing their human property anywhere in the United States. And so, in theory, what Taney says is that there are no free states. There is no free territory. If a slave owner from Virginia wants to go to Massachusetts and set up a plantation, he can do so because the Constitution protects his right to do that. And so that's what's really disturbing for white Northerners is this idea that the Supreme court of the United States has said, slavery can go wherever slave owners want it to go.

Lincoln's reaction to the Dred Scott decision

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CHRIS BONNER:

In the aftermath of the Dred Scott case, Lincoln starts doing a couple of things that I think are really notable. One is that he starts talking about the “slave power.” And this is a kind of conspiracy theory among antislavery figures that a combination of lawmakers and judges and slave owners are trying to use the power of the federal government to spread slavery places where it doesn't already exist. And so Lincoln says that Taney is a leading figure in a “slave power” conspiracy, a collective effort to make slavery expand. And so he starts to sort of pick up on and echo this antislavery argument. One of the other things Lincoln does is say that the United States is a “house divided” and that the nation as a house divided cannot stand.

CHRIS BONNER:

And I think the house divided speech is sometimes read or seen as a sort of call for compromise. That there needs to be a middle ground found. But what Lincoln's actually saying in the house divided speech is that there will be no compromise. That the nation is now half slave, half free, but what really needs to happen is that the free half needs to try to win out or the slave half will. And so Taney's Dred Scott decision is an effort to make the nation all slave. And so Lincoln sees that kind of effort as a reflection of the reality that there can be no compromise because white Southerners, because pro-slavery interests are trying so hard to make the nation all slave. And so really it's a, it's a speech that's calling for white Northerners to stand up and defend freedom where it exists and to recognize the threat of the slave power.

Frederick Douglass

00:48:21:00

CHRIS BONNER:

So Frederick Douglass' abolitionist career really begins not long after he escaped slavery. In the early 1840s he starts giving speeches across the North, and he's giving speeches that come to be developed into his first autobiography, "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass". And so that's published in 1845. And at that moment, I think there's a... you know, it's hard to know, but I think there's a good argument to be made that Douglass is the most famous African-American in the country. So already by the mid-1840s, he is a really notable figure. And it's because of the power of the language and the stories that Douglass is telling in his narrative, and the power of his oratory. He's just a really skilled and charismatic speaker.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so he spends the next decade and a half working to try to promote anti-slavery ideas and to ensure that people in positions of more formal power, people like Abraham Lincoln, would hear and be aware of anti-slavery politics. By the time we get to the 1860s, when Douglass is really writing and speaking directly to Lincoln and eventually meeting with Lincoln during the Civil War, Douglass is, I think in many circles, is just as famous, just as well-known, just as important to a lot of people as Abraham Lincoln. He is, I would say in a lot of ways, the best known and perhaps most influential Black activist of the antebellum period.

Douglass' first meeting with Lincoln

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CHRIS BONNER:

When Douglass is first meeting with Lincoln at the White House, when they have this first conversation, Douglass reflects on it later in his life and says that one of the things that was most surprising was that Lincoln was free of the prejudices that

typically plague white Americans. And this is something that Douglass who is, you know, born into slavery, lived in freedom, but a precarious and tenuous freedom in the North. Traveled through Europe and returned to the U.S. to reflect on the intensity of prejudice in the North. Douglass really knew what it meant to live and talk with white Americans who were prejudiced, who were racist.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so I think it's really interesting that, you know, whether Lincoln was or was not actually free of those prejudices, he was able to perform a freedom from those prejudices in a way that made sense to Douglass, to act as though he was not as deeply racist as so many other white Americans. But one of the other things that's really interesting about these early meetings is that Douglass is meeting with Lincoln in part to insist on a change in the pay policy for Black and white soldiers. Douglass is insisting that Black men should be paid the same wages as white men in the Union military. And Lincoln says, "Yes, I understand that this is a concern. I understand that this is a problem, but," essentially Lincoln says, "The policy was created in part because of, or in response to the prejudices of white soldiers." So Lincoln, even if he's not personally prejudiced, I think that in this meeting, he is expressing his sense that sometimes you have to acquiesce to white Americans prejudices. And so he's sort of like endorsing prejudice, even if it's not his personal feeling by accepting a racially biased policy in terms of the pay for Union soldiers.

Perceptions of Lincoln before he took office

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CHRIS BONNER:

In the time before Lincoln sort of takes the oath of office the first time, there's a lot of, sort of polarizing sentiment in the country about Lincoln. In the South, Lincoln is a figure of terror. Again and again, in the late 1850s and in the early 1860s, Lincoln said that he had no interest in trying to change or eliminate slavery in the places where it already exists. Essentially, he said, "I don't want to touch slavery in the South." One of the things he said, though, was that he hoped that the nation could put slavery on a path to “ultimate extinction.” And that phrase really stuck with white Southerners. It was a phrase that to them reflected the idea that they're sort of defining and central social and economic institution was wrong and should end eventually.

CHRIS BONNER:

So part of the context of Lincoln's sort of arrival to the presidency is that he arrives and takes the oath of office over a nation that is broken. Seven states have seceded by the time Lincoln takes office. And this was a preemptive strike on the part of white Southerners. It was a response to their, I think, really irrational fear that Lincoln was dangerous to them. So before Lincoln is able to even do anything as president, Southerners led by South Carolina have decided to leave the Union.

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CHRIS BONNER:

There's an irony to the fact of secession. Lincoln said he didn't want to touch slavery in the South. He also said he didn't think he had the power to touch slavery in the South. The irony is that by seceding from the Union and by going to war, white Southerners allowed Lincoln to exercise his power as commander in chief in time of war to enact policies like the Emancipation Proclamation. And so Secession in a way created the context for wartime emancipation. And so it's funny as somebody who thinks the Confederates were not the wisest of political actors.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that I think is interesting is that at the same time that, at the same time that, and precisely because white Southerners were so anxious about Lincoln's presidency, I think that we can envision enslaved people in the South being excited about the possibilities of a Lincoln presidency. We know that there were really robust networks of information and rumor and ideas being spread among enslaved people in the South. We know that, or I think it's pretty easy to envision a slave owner angrily denouncing Lincoln, and you know, the 'Black Republicans,' angrily denouncing the possibility of abolition under a Lincoln presidency, and being overheard by an enslaved person who then goes and tells their friends and family and neighbors about this guy, Lincoln, who seems to be the enemy of their owner. And so I think it makes sense that at the same time that slave owners in the South were really worried and talking anxiously about Lincoln, that enslaved people might come to see him as a potential ally, as a person who they could work alongside to try to make their freedom, to realize their dreams of freedom.

Ballots in the election of 1860

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think one of the most striking examples of the opposition to Lincoln in the U.S. in 1860 and 1861, and particularly in the South, is that Lincoln's name didn't appear on the ballot in most Southern states. That in the election of 1860 most Southerners didn't even have the option to vote for Lincoln, for the Republican candidate. I think that that is a... I think it's sort of impossible to imagine now, the sense of a state not putting a candidate's name on a ballot, but that was the extent of white Southern

opposition to the idea, like even the possibility of a Lincoln presidency. You can't vote for him.

Lincoln's commitment to the Union

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think what's most memorable in terms of, you know, like a personal quality of Abraham Lincoln was his commitment to doing a job. I think about the first inaugural address where he says essentially that, you know, the issue of secession and the prospect of civil war is in the hands of white Southerners. That it's up to them to decide. And what he says is that my job, like the pledge that I have made when I took the oath of office, is to preserve the Union. And that is a thing that stuck with him. That is a commitment that he held on to throughout the Civil War, throughout his presidency. His job was to preserve the Union, to uphold the Constitution.

CHRIS BONNER:

And that meant in the early stages of the war that he was not invested in emancipation as a policy because the Union was his job. That also meant to that as he came to redefine the Civil War and as the combined efforts of enslaved people and Congress and the military and the president, as they made the war a war for freedom, Lincoln came to invest the cause of emancipation with that same commitment, because emancipation became a war aim and became a foundation for what it would've meant to actually preserve the Union. And so I think that that kind of, you know, dedication to a job is really compelling.

The dilemma of Fort Sumter

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CHRIS BONNER:

Lincoln did not want to start a civil war. Lincoln recognized that public opinion, I think, was on his side as a person who had not actually done anything to harass white Southerners to compel secession, and so in the winter of 1860 and 1861, Lincoln was essentially waiting and trying to make sure that he didn't do anything too dramatic to sort of touch off military conflict. What he did that was kind of, sort of strategic and sharp was say, "I am going to hold on to all of the territory that belongs to the Union," including military bases in places like Virginia or South Carolina that are technically in the South, and South Carolina in particular, technically held by a seceded- or connected to a seceded state. Lincoln says there are Union soldiers at Fort Sumter in South Carolina and they need supplies, and so he sends a supply ship into Fort Sumter and I think anticipating that sending that ship in would touch off conflict, and it did.

CHRIS BONNER:

Southerners fired on the ship. They fired on the Fort. And I think 36 hours of bombing later, the nation had fought its first battle in a civil war, and that would be the beginning point of this conflict. And I think it was important for Lincoln and it was important for public opinion that Southerners had fired the first shots.

Black response to Lincoln's assassination

01:00:29:00

CHRIS BONNER:

African-Americans were in mourning about Lincoln's assassination. They recognized during the Civil War that Lincoln had done a great deal to advance the possibilities of Black freedom in the United States, that Lincoln had developed into a person who was an ally for them. And so the uncertainty of what would come without Lincoln was really troubling.

CHRIS BONNER:

Just thinking about the idea of a president meeting with a Black person like Frederick Douglass in the White House is a marker of how transformative of a presence he was as president. Lincoln was far from perfect on questions of race and racism and freedom or equality in the United States, but Lincoln was a person who recognized that Black people had voices worth hearing. And after his death, there was a possibility that there wouldn't be another president like that, and in some cases there wasn't for a long time.

The experience of Black Union soldiers

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CHRIS BONNER:

Black soldiers were notoriously treated unequally in the early stages of the Civil War. Under the conditions of the legislation in which they were included in the military, they were paid $13 a month and they would have an allowance or an amount of money from that subtracted for the cost of their clothing. And white soldiers were paid $13 a month and they were given an additional allowance for clothing on top of that $13 a month. And so there's a fundamental difference in terms of what they

could earn for doing the same work. And this sort of became increasingly a problem as Black men were actually going to war and actually in battle fighting for defense of the Union, fighting in opposition to slave owners and opposition to rebel Southerners. And so it's a marker I think- the inequality of pay for Black and white soldiers is a marker of the limited ways in which Black people were being included in the Civil War era.

CHRIS BONNER:

They were included, but on fundamentally different terms, fundamentally unequal terms and I think that that is a reflection of the Civil War era more generally, that you know, being freed from slavery doesn't necessarily mean equality. Being able to take part in this war doesn't necessarily mean that they are taking part on equal terms. But with that said, the Civil War had really transformative meanings for Black Americans. For Black men, it in some cases, gave them an opportunity to go to war with slave owners, with people who they knew were opposed to the idea of Black equality or Black freedom or Black Americanness. So Black men are able to feel that kind of empowerment through military combat.

01:03:43:00

CHRIS BONNER:

Black men and women and children in the Civil War era are able to cultivate a relationship with the federal government. They seek out what come to be refugee camps. They work alongside white soldiers, Black women, in large cases, work doing laundry for the Union army and really contributing in concrete ways to making war work for the United States. And that's really, I think, meaningful as a foundation for some of the broader political claims that African-Americans are making during and after the Civil War. They say we, men and women, we contributed to the war effort. We deserve to be treated with equality. Not only do we deserve emancipation, but

we deserve justice. And so the work of Black men and women in the Civil War really is a foundation for later Black politics.

Douglass' understanding of the Emancipation Proclamation

01:04:50:00

CHRIS BONNER:

The idea that Douglass is sort of expressing, that Lincoln inaugurated this great work of emancipation, I think is really fascinating. That African-Americans, people like Douglass understood that Lincoln was not really the 'great emancipator.' Abraham Lincoln, from their perspective, didn't free the slaves. But what Lincoln did was inaugurate that work in a way. The Emancipation Proclamation created a pathway to freedom. It created the possibility or it ensured the possibility that if enslaved people made it to the Union lines, then they would be able to be free. What that meant, though, was that enslaved people had to, one, get away from their owners and, two, make it all the way to the Union military. And so there's a way to think about the Emancipation Proclamation as, you know, establishing a path or opening a door. The Emancipation Proclamation doesn't technically free anybody, but it does create the possibility for Black people to seize and claim their own freedom, which they did, they had been doing, and they continued to do after the enactment of that policy.

"Emancipation worked because people in power cared about people who didn't have it."

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that seems most important to me about Lincoln and really about the Republican party of Lincoln was this investment in the idea that a government should look out for vulnerable people. There is a way to think about Lincoln as just, like, freeing the slaves or to think about the Civil War as creating emancipation. But what really happens, and I think is fascinating in the Civil War era, is that the government and individuals together create this robust relationship between Black people and federal authorities. Black people are able to make their concerns heard and federal government officials are listening to those concerns. And I think that the policy of, or the process of emancipation really reflects this relationship. Enslaved people run to the Union lines and say, "We want to be free." Generals like Benjamin Butler take in enslaved people and say, "They're 'contraband.' They can not be returned to our enemies."

CHRIS BONNER:

Building on that, Congress enacts the confiscation acts, which say that the Union military cannot be used to return enslaved people to slave owners. Building on that, Lincoln enacts the Emancipation Proclamation. And so there's this combination of the efforts of federal lawmakers to listen to and respond to Black people's concerns and Black people making those concerns heard. The policies of emancipation, the greatest policies of Lincoln's presidency worked because the president was hearing the needs of people in need and responding to those needs. And so I think that it's really, really important that we see that the Civil War and emancipation worked because people in power cared about people who didn't have it.

Lincoln's evolving racial views

01:08:16:00

CHRIS BONNER:
In the early stages of the Civil War, Lincoln was what might be called a racial pessimist. He didn't believe that Black and white Americans could co-exist in freedom in the United States. And so as the war is progressing and at the same time that he is contemplating the policy of emancipation, he invites a group of Black men who were sort of understood as community leaders, to the White House, and essentially tries to persuade them to persuade other Black people to leave the United States. Lincoln said, among other things, to these guys, "But for your race among us, we would not have a war." Essentially what he says is that the problems of the nation are problems of the presence of Black people in that nation.

CHRIS BONNER:
So it's this really stunning moment when Lincoln revealed that he was governing, in 1861 and 1862, from a perspective of a person who doesn't believe that Black people can really fully belong in the United States. And Black Americans were opposed to colonization, opposed to the idea that they should be forced or urged to leave the United States. They had been for decades. The United States was their native country. And so the Black folks that Lincoln spoke to in 1862 don't really, you know, convince that many people that they should leave the country. Lincoln eventually sort of abandons ... He doesn't, like, renounce the idea of colonization, but he does sort of stop talking about it publicly. But I think what's really striking is the shift from Lincoln in 1862 saying, "You know what? I think African-Americans should leave the United States," to one of Lincoln's last public speeches in 1865 where he says, "We should really consider ensuring that Black men and especially Black soldiers should be able to vote."

CHRIS BONNER:

I think that there's a clear evolution of Lincoln's perspective, of Lincoln's feelings from a person who in 1862 doesn't think African-Americans belong in the country, to in 1865 wanting to ensure the possibility that African-American men can not only belong, but really participate in the governing of the United States. It's a fascinating transformation for him.

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