CHRISTOPHER BONNER

LINCOLN'S DILEMMA

KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Christopher Bonner Interview

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Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman

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Chris Bonner interview. Take one. Mark.

Lincoln's evolving view of colonization

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CHRIS BONNER:

So I think Lincoln was a long-term advocate and believer in colonization as a project. I think that Lincoln held this view. He was convinced in a lot of ways that Black and white folks couldn't live together functionally in the United States, and so I think that that view stuck with him. One of the things that changes really profoundly for Lincoln during the Civil War of course are his

feelings about emancipation. But I think that his arrival at emancipation as a policy is later, much later than his embrace of colonization. And so colonization in some ways, like, dies hard with Lincoln.

CHRIS BONNER:

And I think that one of the things you can see across the war is that even as he's talking with Black folks and trying to promote this policy and they're pushing back or just declining to get involved, Lincoln sort of sticks with colonization but he also comes to have doubts about it because he sees, like "you know what? I don't know that Black folks actually want to do this." What's probably most surprising though is that even as he's seeing that Black folks seem to be uninterested in colonization, he's still trying to find ways to encourage some Black folks to do it. And so, you know, one of the things that sticks out is in 1863, Lincoln authorizes a group of representatives to go into the refugee camps in Virginia and try to talk to and essentially recruit freed men and women and ask them to leave the United States and go settle in Central America or South America.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so this is, you know, after the Emancipation Proclamation has taken effect, after he's had this meeting in 1862 where Black leaders reject colonization, but he's still sort of trying to find ways to make this thing happen and I think it's an old belief in Lincoln and it's one that doesn't go away very easily.

The limitations and potential of the Emancipation Proclamation

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think the Emancipation Proclamation was both radical and very sort of limited and moderate in a lot of ways. It was radical because it was a statement that the federal government was going to be taking steps to end slavery. It was radical because it said that freedom, that emancipation was a war aim, and so it's saying that the Civil War can't be won unless enslaved people in the South are freed. But it was also conservative or moderate or limited in profound ways because it didn't touch slavery in the border states, because it required enslaved people to find their ways to the Union lines in order to actually gain the freedom that was being held out. You know, one could say that it was conservative or moderate because Black activists, Black people had been insisting that the war was about slavery, that the war should be a war for freedom from the beginnings of the conflict, and it didn't go into effect until 1863.

CHRIS BONNER:

So, you know, when I talk with my students about the Emancipation Proclamation, I try to make sure that they understand that it was both limited in terms of what it did for enslaved people, but also really profound as a statement of what the government could do and what it was trying to do in relation to the institution of slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

I think the biggest difference between the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and the final version that's enacted in January, 1863, the preliminary proclamation asks Congress to try to find funding and develop plans for colonization. And Lincoln, between that point and January of '63, he seems to have decided that even if he still is sort of on board with colonization as a project, he doesn't want to put that in the final document. He doesn't want that to be part of what he wants Congress to be working on. And so there's a change in that regard. Like he's coming to see freedom for

Black people in the United States as something that Black people want and that maybe he should be trying to create in his position as president.

The question of Black men gaining citizenship

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CHRIS BONNER:

This is a tough question. What did Lincoln think Black people's status would be after the war when he starts to open up enlistment to Black people during the war? We can't say what he was really envisioning. I wouldn't say that for certain, Lincoln was thinking, "Okay, Black men are going to serve in the military and then they're going to be equal. Then we're going to deem them citizens." What we know though is that Black activists, people like Frederick Douglass had been insisting that that was the transaction, or that would be the transaction from the start. Douglass and other Black activists believed fervently that Black military service was going to be the foundation for Black claims to legal equality during and after the war.

CHRIS BONNER:

They were saying this, that's how they were trying to encourage African Americans to find whatever way they could to contribute to the war effort. So there's this discourse that's circulating among Black activists that service should yield citizenship. I'm sure that Lincoln was aware of that. I don't know that Lincoln agreed with that or that he believed that, or that he was ready to accept that as a reality.

The significance of Robert Smalls' escape

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CHRIS BONNER:

Robert Smalls essentially tricks a bunch of white Southerners in order to secure freedom for himself and for a bunch of his family and the family of his crew. He waits until his captain and the white crewmen on the Planter decide to go ashore for a night and he puts this plan into action. He knows how to pilot and navigate this boat through Charleston Harbor and he and his crew members stop, the Black crew members, enslaved crew members, they stop in the harbor and collect a number of their family members and then sail out. And what's treacherous about this is that there are checkpoints all throughout the harbor and they have to try to make their way safely through these checkpoints.

CHRIS BONNER:

So Smalls puts on a hat and disguises his face and some of the sources suggest that he disguised his walk so that he would look, in the darkness, like his captain, and he makes his way through all the checkpoints. And then once he passes Fort Sumter, he approaches the Union troops, the Union Navy out in the ocean, and raises a white flag and surrenders this ship to the Union military. And so he's joked or he's deceived essentially a group of Confederate officials and authorities and made his way to freedom and to contributing something valuable to a group of the Union military out in the ocean.

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CHRIS BONNER:

So one way we can think about how bold and significant, I guess, Smalls' decision was, is that I think there were eight Black crew members, enslaved men, forced to work on the Planter, and two of tlaborhem decided not to join him on this journey out toward the Union military. They thought it was too dangerous. They thought it was a sort of suicide mission. Another way to think about what's going on here is that this is a person who was not only

enslaved, but had been required to use his labor to aid essentially the rebel cause. And he was not only appropriating his labor, but appropriating a ship, a vessel that was significant to that Confederate military effort and stealing it in order to free himself.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so I think that- you know, the significance of this was not only the freedom of Smalls and his family, it was not only the statement that's made when an enslaved person runs away from their owner. It was a military act. It was a deprivation of valuable property from the Confederate army and a contribution of that property to the union. And so I think that there's a lot of ways to think about how big it was that Robert Smalls did what he did.

The Battle of Fort Wagner and the 54th Regiment

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CHRIS BONNER:

The charge and the sort of failed charge of the 54th at Fort Wagner was a reflection for a lot of American people about the possibilities of Black bravery, of Black valor. How dedicated Black men could be in this fight. I think that many American people were- white Americans were skeptical about Black men's ability to be significant contributors to the Civil War, and part of what Black folks were always trying to do was not only fight against the rebel Southerners, but to fight against these perceptions among white Northerners. I think that Fort Wagner also must have been really important for Black Northerners, for Black Americans, in part because the 54th Regiment had become symbolically important as this early group of Black soldiers and because the casualties were so massive in this battle.

CHRIS BONNER:

So one of the things that I think is really interesting about this is Frederick Douglass's son, Lewis Douglass, was serving at Fort Wagner. He was in the 54th and he wrote in detail about the carnage of the battle in a letter that he sent to his parents. So Lewis Douglass survives and he sends to Frederick and Anna Douglass, he sends them this note describing how horrific and how shocking it was to see so many of his comrades fall in this battle. And what's really striking to me is the part of how Lewis Douglass ends this letter. He says he survived, but he says, "If I die tonight, I won't die a coward." And closes, "Goodbye." So I think it's this really fascinating way to see for Black Americans how well they understood the stakes of the war and how invested they were in the war.

CHRIS BONNER:

You know, it's impossible to read Lewis Douglass's letter and not imagine what it would have meant to Frederick and Anna to hear their son has survived this battle, but he seems convinced that he might not survive it. And so it's a really important moment for them to see, and for somebody like Douglass who had been so passionate in advocating Black men to go to war, to see like this is what it's going to cost to try to win equality through war. And this is the peril of freedom or racial justice won through war, that many Black folks were unable to enjoy it because they died in that fight. And I think that's part of what's so significant about the battle of Fort Wagner.

The Fort Pillow Massacre

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CHRIS BONNER:

The massacre at Fort Pillow in 1864 was a result of Confederate policy. In the aftermath of Lincoln's embrace of emancipation, Confederate officials say, "We will now declare that all Black people that we encounter on the battlefield will be treated as rebel slaves, and therefore they'll be given no quarter. They will not be taken as prisoners of war. They can be killed with impunity." And this is essentially what happens in the aftermath of the battle of Fort Pillow. A number of Black soldiers realized that they're surrounded, that they're outnumbered, and they try to surrender, and many of them are killed while they're holding a white flag, while they're not holding guns.

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CHRIS BONNER:

The massacre of Fort Pillow is a moment that reflects the dangers, the risks of military service for Black men. It's a really clear marker for I think all American people, all Northerners at least, that Black men are taking tremendous risks or facing tremendous danger, and a disproportionate, distinctive kind of danger in fighting for their freedom in the ways that they are and fighting for the nation in the ways that they are. The problems of white supremacy continue to affect and harm Black soldiers during the Civil War.

CHRIS BONNER:

I think Lincoln is reluctant to treat Confederate soldiers, rebel soldiers in the ways that the Confederates have treated Black soldiers because Lincoln thinks of himself as a personal of principle and thinks of himself still in a lot of ways as a leader of the nation. His project is not to brutalize his enemy in the ways that Confederates' project was to brutalize and continue to oppress Black people. And so in this project of trying to continue to see himself as better than his enemy and as a force for national reunification, even through war, I think he is reluctant to stoop to the level of Confederates and what was exhibited at Fort Pillow.

The impact of Frederick Douglass on Lincoln's thinking

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Chris Bonner:

In the summer of 1864, Lincoln and Douglass meet, and Lincoln is really worried about where he stands, and his stakes, or his chances, in the election of 1864. He's concerned that he'll lose the election and that if he does, that all the work that he's been doing for war time emancipation, that that might be rolled back, or that it might be ended. And so, he talks with Douglass and does what I think is a strange thing, which is to ask Douglass to help him figure out ways to get more enslaved people to run to the Union army and to seek freedom with the military. He wants to try to free as many people as he can if his time in office is going to run out.

CHRIS BONNER:

This is important. I think it's a reflection of how deeply invested Lincoln is in trying to help enslaved people get free. It's a real marker of how important that is to him. What's weird about it to me, though, and what's strange about it, is that Black folks have been finding their own way to the Union military since the beginning of the war. Since the spring of 1861, African-Americans have known how to get there. And of course, they could use help, they could use more Union troops, you know like, out in the field looking for enslaved people, but it's not as though African-Americans hadn't been doing this work on their own.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so it's kind of- it's sort of asking a question that already has an answer. Just continue to send soldiers out, continue to enact policies that will ensure

that these African-Americans will actually be free when they make it to the Union lines. Doing those things would have enhanced the work that African-Americans had already been doing. And so, Lincoln's asking this question in a way that suggests that he's almost uninformed about what African-Americans have been doing to this point.

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CHRIS BONNER:

Part of what Douglass does and says about this is that this revealed to him how deeply invested Lincoln was in emancipation as a policy, that it showed Douglass Lincoln's conviction, Lincoln's serious desire to help African-Americans become free. And I think that's a big transformation for Douglass who earlier in their meetings had said, "Well, Lincoln seems to be free of the prejudice that hinders so many other White Americans," but now he's seeing that Lincoln is a person who was really wanting to do work to help to fight slavery. And so, it's a change in Douglass' sense of who Lincoln was, and I think it's a change in who Lincoln was.

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the challenges I think of reading Douglass' perceptions of Lincoln is that a lot of what Douglass wrote about Lincoln came from much later, and so he's looking back in the 1870s and 1880s on this person that he was interacting with in the 1860s. And he's looking back fondly because Lincoln was a really significant figure for Black Americans.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that I think is really interesting about this relationship is that there's a lot of ways in which Lincoln's evolution was exactly what Frederick Douglass was envisioning and calling for in terms of his sort of

addresses toward White Americans. So, early in the war Douglass is writing a lot and directly criticizing Lincoln for his reluctance to enlist Black men for his resistance to emancipation as a policy. But more broadly, I think like, when Douglass is saying, "Let Black men serve, and they will prove that they are entitled to equality, that they are deserving of citizenship," and then in 1865, when Lincoln says, "Maybe Black soldiers should have the right to vote," that is like the culmination of Douglass' ideal of what Black military service could be. This person, President Lincoln, who in 1862 thought that African-Americans couldn't even really belong in the United States is, in 1865, saying Black men, Black soldiers should have the right to vote. That is exactly what Douglass hoped would happen when Black men served in the war.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so, I think this is part of their relationship, is the way that Lincoln's evolution was a reflection of, and a response to, the advocacy of people like Douglass and the actions of Black soldiers in the war.

Lincoln's capacity for empathy

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Chris Bonner:

In order to really understand Lincoln, understand, and I'm not thinking so much about assessing or evaluating him as a president or a person, we have to understand that he was a person who was before, and for much of the early stages of the Civil War, he was a white supremacist. He did not believe that Black people could be his equals. But we also have to understand that during the war, he evolved, and maybe what's most striking is that regardless of whether he believed that Black people could be his equals, we know that he did work to try to make Black people's lives better, to help to emancipate

enslaved people, to advocate for, in a very mild or moderate way, to advocate for Black people to have formal political rights.

CHRIS BONNER:

So, we have to recognize that Lincoln changed and evolved and that his thinking developed. That's one of the, I think, one of the most significant things about him as president, that he was a different person when he left office than he was when he entered it. But we also have to recognize who he was when he entered office, and we shouldn't forget that.

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think Lincoln changed because- Lincoln evolved because he listened to the various people who were around him, and whether that's physically around him like a William Seward who was far more anti-slavery than Lincoln had been early in his life, whether it's people who were sort of occasionally around him like Frederick Douglass who was insisting that the Civil War should be an abolition war, whatever it was, whether it's even people who he met very briefly like the Black folks who he tried to convince to advocate colonization and who didn't do it, Lincoln is picking up on that. And I think that he's very thoughtful about, you know, I would say broadly, public opinion.

CHRIS BONNER:

He's very thoughtful about what people are thinking, how they're responding to, how they're reacting to his policies and his decisions. And I think that that is a position or a way of thinking that allows him or encourages him to change in relation to the context in which he's existing, in which he's operating. He sees how American people feel about slavery, about emancipation, about Black enlistment, and Black rights, and as those feelings

change, as the voices that have access to Lincoln change, Lincoln himself changes and responds to them.

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think that in order for anyone to enact changes in the interest of people who are in need, that person who's in a position of power has to care about those people, has to recognize that they are suffering, that they are in need. And I think that for Lincoln, the Civil War, the deaths of African-Americans on behalf of liberation, the deaths of White soldiers on behalf of the Union, these things lead him to care in new ways about a broader population of American people. And what they really lead him to do is to try to encourage other American people to care.

CHRIS BONNER:

So, I'm thinking back now to the Gettysburg Address, what Lincoln says is that the only way to make the massive loss of life of the Civil War meaningful is to make the Civil War a war for a new birth of freedom. What he's saying is that, "I have started to care in a new way about African-Americans. We American people collectively must care in order to help us make sense of, help us reckon with, the horror of the loss of so much life in a battle like Gettysburg and in the war as a whole." And so I think that the fact that so many people were killed, that so much of the nation geographically was destroyed during the Civil War, that led people in positions of power, in many cases, to care in new ways about people in need. I guess I want to say, I hope that we don't need something as horrific as the Civil War in order for people in power to care in the same way about people in need now.

The 1864 election

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CHRIS BONNER:

The election of 1864, I think, was so difficult for Lincoln because it was this moment that required him to see how divided the part of the Union was over which he was in control. I think it's really fascinating. His whole project was about trying to re-secure the United States, and what he sees is that there are a lot of people in the United States, in the North, who don't feel as he does about emancipation, don't feel as he does about continuing the war until white southerners are surrendering. And so, the biggest concern I think for Lincoln is that someone like George McClellan will be elected and will move to negotiate terms with the Confederates and will actually allow the Union to remain broken. This is tremendously high stakes. The union was Lincoln's fundamental concern during the Civil War, and so he's really worried that if he does not win reelection, the Union might truly end.

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think by 1864, and you know, the conversations he has with Frederick Douglass and efforts to try to secure freedom for more enslaved African-Americans, by late 1864, Lincoln is really deeply invested in using the power that he has to not only save the Union but also to free enslaved people, and that he's really coming to see that freeing enslaved people is essential to saving the union. There's a way that Douglass writes about, or describes Lincoln's beliefs in 1864 and 1865, and it's- what Douglass says is that, "Justice to the Negro is the salvation of the Union." And I think that this is part of what Lincoln understands. Slavery broke the union, and to allow slavery to survive might endanger it in the future.

The Gettysburg Address

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think the heart of Lincoln's transformation in thinking about war aims is really symbolized in the Gettysburg Address. In the early stages of the war, Lincoln says, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do so," and he seems to be very honest about that. What he thinks is necessary and is desirable is saving the union. But by 1863, in November of 1863, he's saying that the Civil War should entail a new birth of freedom. And he says- he reminds his listeners in the Gettysburg Address that the nation was founded on these ideas of natural liberty and natural equality. What Lincoln is saying is that the meaning of the war and the meaning of the Union must be a realization of those principles, that the Union is insufficient, that the Union is perhaps even meaningless without actually making real this idea that all men are created equal and that all people should be entitled to liberty. And so, that's the, I think, the crux of this change. Lincoln says that freedom is essential. Freedom broadly is essential for the United States as a nation.

“Black Republican” rhetoric

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CHRIS BONNER:

I guess the epithet that was hurled at Lincoln before the election of 1860 and in the aftermath was that Lincoln was a leader of what was called the Black Republicans, and the claim that white Southerners were making was that Lincoln- and that some Northern Democrats were making, was that Lincoln and the Republican Party didn't only want to restrict the spread of slavery,

but that they wanted social equality, was the language that was circulating a lot, that they wanted Black and white people to freely intermingle, that they wanted Black and white people to marry and have children and have all the things that came with sexual relations and real equality between the races.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so, this is a language that circulates and recirculates in the election of 1864, that this is this fear that Lincoln's embrace of emancipation is symbolizing his shift toward this policy, or this set of practices, of social equality, that Lincoln wants to open white spaces, white homes, white families, to Black people, and that that's a threat to whiteness. And so, this is a part of the rhetoric that's circulating in both of these elections, in both of these moments of opposition to Lincoln's campaign.

Black Americans' response to Lincoln's assassination

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CHRIS BONNER:

So, Lincoln was a tremendously important president, and we can't neglect the fact that that was understood, especially in 1865. Lincoln won reelection in 1864 because the Union military triumphed in some significant ways just before the election, and that allowed him to garner public support. And so, for much of late '64 and into 1865, I think opinion of Lincoln is much more positive than it had been in earlier stages of the war, among all people in the Northern states.

CHRIS BONNER:

A key part of, I think, why Lincoln is thought of so fondly in the immediate aftermath of his assassination is that Black Americans are expressing and

conveying how important he had been to them. And as much as we recognize the limits of Lincoln's emancipation policies, the limits of his embrace of racial equality, we have to recognize that for Black folks, this was their most powerful and really singular supporter, their strongest and fiercest advocate who had died. Lincoln did a lot of stuff for Black people, and they were tremendously sad for themselves, in addition to sad for the person who had been killed, but sad for themselves about what it meant that this person was lost, that this advocate could no longer support them. And so, I think that that's a big part of this imagery of Lincoln as a martyr. He had done tremendous things for African-Americans, and African-Americans were despondent that he could no longer do those things on their behalf.

The "Great Emancipator" simplifies Lincoln's legacy

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CHRIS BONNER:

I could see a way in which Lincoln being seen as the Great Emancipator and being celebrated as such is a suggestion that, and is sort of analogous to, this feeling that emancipation is the end, that all Black folks needed was freedom, that belief that freedom was the thing, that freedom was the only thing, that belief I think has been profoundly significant in terms of the limits of equality, the limits of justice, the limits of real and full liberation that African-Americans have struggled against since the Civil War Era. And so, the feeling that Lincoln is the architect of emancipation and ought to be celebrated for emancipation alone, I think, is parallel to this feeling that emancipation alone was enough. And we know that emancipation was not enough, that freedom and equality were different things, and one was secured during the war and one was left to be fought for decades.

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CHRIS BONNER:

To take this myth of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, if we think about Lincoln solely as that, as a person who freed the slaves, as the saying goes, what we lose is the reality of Lincoln as a thoughtful leader, as a person who was listening, who was reflecting, who was introspecting and trying to decide how he felt about emancipation and what he could do about emancipation. And so, when we see Lincoln as the Great Emancipator and suggest that, "Oh, he just freed the slaves because he could," we overlook all of the things that he did that we should want our leaders and we should want all of our people to do, which is to think and reflect and be considerate of other people and their ideas and their needs. And so, I think Lincoln looks better as a person who gradually came to embrace emancipation as a policy than he does as a person who just freed the slaves because he always hated slavery. It's much more impressive to me to see him as evolving.

William Lloyd Garrison

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CHRIS BONNER:

Maybe the most famous abolitionist in American history is William Lloyd Garrison, who was a foundation of this immediatist abolitionist movement. The idea that slavery must be ended as soon as possible, that it was a fire, that it had to be put out. What people might not know or think about when they think about Garrison is that Garrison was radicalized in a lot of ways by talking to Black people, talking to fugitive slaves who told him how horrific slavery was. And that made Garrison into a person who said slavery is an urgent problem.

CHRIS BONNER:

What they also might not know is that Garrison, and this sort of vehicle for radical abolitionism, his newspaper, The Liberator, The Liberator was supported financially, it was upheld, by Black people. Most of Garrison's earliest subscribers were African-Americans. And so it's impossible to really understand, or to really know, the abolitionist movement as it was promoted by white Americans, without understanding how important Black people, enslaved people, fugitive slaves, Black abolitionists were to making the abolitionist movement as radical, and as vocal and as impassioned as it was.

Enslavers' mechanisms of control

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CHRIS BONNER:

Slave owners had a lot of mechanisms that they used to try to ensure, and really to compel, Black people to work. And one of the... I think one of the most interesting of those mechanisms was the horse. An overseer might ride, or stroll, through a field where rows of enslaved people were forced to work, and would, sitting atop of this horse, be able to look down upon the enslaved people and see more of them than he would be able to see if he were on ground level. And so, there's a way in which the horse, the technology of animal husbandry, I guess, has enabled an overseer, enabled slave owners to watch more carefully enslaved people.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the other ways that we understand slave owners compelling enslaved people to do work is through not only violence, things like the whip, but the threat of violence. The understanding that if an enslaved person didn't produce a set amount of work, if they did not pick a particular amount of

cotton, if they didn't do some other task that they were expected to do in a given day, that they would be whipped that they would be punished.

And so enslaved people would have their work measured. They would have their work assessed. And often, if they did not meet a particular mark, they would be brutalized. And so there's not only the actual whipping as a mechanism of control, but there is the fear of the whipping as a mechanism of driving an enslaved person to work each day to meet a particular standard of labor.

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the horrific things about slavery is that it, through the regular brutality of enslaved people, people who were bound could be made to do work that they did not want to do. And there's a way in which regular whipping, and the threat of whipping, could urge enslaved people on, on a daily basis in a plantation, in a field. Understanding that if they did not meet a standard, they would face violence. That threat, that fear could work and persist in enslaved people's minds, even when they weren't actively being brutalized. But the fear, the threat of brutality, was another spur, another tool that slave owners used in their efforts to control bound people.

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CHRIS BONNER:

Slave owners like to think of themselves, many of them like to think of themselves as scientists. They like to think that they were pursuing really modern, cutting edge techniques to maximize productivity. And some of those techniques would include details about how much food to provide for enslaved people in a given day, what kinds of food would ensure that they would do their work? Some of those techniques were about – Some of those

knowledges, I guess, were about what sorts of crops to plant and when. How to sort of manipulate the landscape to one's end.

CHRIS BONNER:

There's a way in which slave owners in these newspapers and journals and magazines and even books, they would distribute knowledge and ideas that I think reflected their ideals, their visions of control. And in the same ways that they would write about manipulating the landscape to extract maximum productivity from a given crop, they would write about manipulating enslaved people to extract maximum productivity from those human beings.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so there's a way in which you can really see the ideology of slave owners as absolute control over their domain, including human beings who they owned, and the landscape on which those human beings were forced to work. The dissemination of this knowledge was done in a way that bought into, or played into, this vision slave owners had of themselves as masters.

Revoking Frémont's proclamation

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CHRIS BONNER:

John C. Frémont was taking steps that I thought... That I think were too bold, too far out there from the perspective of Lincoln. When Frémont declares martial law and says that part of what that means is that enslaved people can be confiscated from rebel slave owners, this is what's going to come in 18... Later in '61 and '62, in the Confiscation Acts by Congress, but this is not what Lincoln envisions as the Civil War, and as the war's purpose and its early stages.

CHRIS BONNER:

Lincoln is very invested in an effort... Early in the war, Lincoln is very invested in an effort to retain or recreate the union without disrupting too much of American people's lives. And so what he wants to do is to try to do all that he can to ensure that American people will come back together, rather than to ensure a policy of emancipation or a massive transformation of slave owning society in the ways that Frémont's proclamation was driving toward.

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CHRIS BONNER:

Lincoln is expressing in this opposition to Frémont's proclamation, he's expressing how deeply he believes in legal order, or at least how much he wants to present himself as such. And this is a big part of the genesis of the Emancipation Proclamation, a big part of Lincoln's eventual investment in the 13th Amendment is that he really believes that the law should be the power of acts in American society. That things should be done through the law, that he should act to the extent that he can with his legal power to free enslaved people.

CHRIS BONNER:

And once that legal power has reached its limits, he should try to secure that through other legal powers, like constitutional amendment. And so I think Lincoln was, throughout his life, a strong believer in the necessity of the law, and sort of following the law. And even as he sort of skirts the law at different moments during the Civil War, I think he really believed that should be the foundation for order in American society, even as something like emancipation was being done to disorder so much about American life.

Passing the 13th Amendment

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CHRIS BONNER:

So the 13th Amendment is really secured in Congress, or passed in Congress, you know, by hook and by crook. It's – There's a lot of wrangling, a lot of horse trading, a lot of, you know, legislative backroom deals that are happening that allow Congress, or that allow Republicans in Congress to gather the votes that they need to pass the 13th Amendment in 1865. And essentially, you know, what I think is so striking about this process is that...

CHRIS BONNER:

So two ways to think about this. A number of congressmen in what remains of the United States in 1865, a number of them vote against the 13th Amendment. They vote against a measure to abolish slavery. What's also surprising is that there was so much work that had to be done to secure the requisite number of votes to actually pass this measure. This is after four years of civil war, after hundreds of thousands of American people had died in what the President had declared quite eloquently was “a war that had to be a war for freedom." And still, at this point, after so much struggle, after so much bloodshed, there were dozens of men in positions of power in the United States who did not believe that slavery should be abolished. And I think that this is critical to understand in order to really know the United States in the Civil War era.

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CHRIS BONNER:

I guess I would say that alongside the difficulty of convincing lawmakers in Congress to embrace the 13th Amendment, I think that it's fascinating, and it's notable that it took a significant amount of time to convince lawmakers across the country to embrace this act. That there are American people

across what remains of the United States in 1864 or 1865, who are really reluctant to, and really resistant to this idea of government enaction of emancipation.

CHRIS BONNER:

For me, one thing that's so surprising about the reluctance to embrace the 13th Amendment is that, as transformative as it was as a congressional measure outlawing slavery, it was also not all that transformative in light of what Black folks were demanding. It was securing freedom. It was not securing Black rights. It was not creating what so many white Americans had been anxiously writing and talking about, which they called social equality. It was not going to make Black people the equals of white people in the United States. It was simply going to make sure that Black people couldn't be enslaved. And so it's sort of stunning when you think about it that way, that white folks were so worried about what the 13th Amendment could mean.

John Wilkes Booth

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CHRIS BONNER:

Lincoln is assassinated in April of 1865, and it's very soon after the Confederate – Sorry, Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox. And what's... So what's striking, I think about Lincoln's assassination is that it's this moment of triumph, of celebration. Lincoln is celebrating, Lincoln is glad, and American people are glad that Lee has decided to give up this war effort. And it looks like peace is coming, it looks like this end of hostilities is near.

CHRIS BONNER:

Lincoln starts, or has started, planning already what the aftermath of the war is going to look like. And one of the things that he starts doing is thinking about what the status of African-Americans will be in this new country. They're freed by law, how will they live? How will they operate in this newly reformed society? And he says that some Black men, that Black soldiers in particular, should be considered eligible for the right to vote. When Lincoln gives this speech, John Wilkes Booth is in the audience, and he's reported to have said to someone standing near him, that that was the last speech Lincoln would ever make.

CHRIS BONNER:

So there's a way to think about John Wilkes booth as assassinating Abraham Lincoln, because Lincoln was advocating for Black rights. I think that the broader truth about John Wilkes Booth is that he was an angry white Southerner, and he found an opportunity to kill Abraham Lincoln, the person who had made so many white Southerners angry by defeating the rebel Confederacy in the war. And so, yeah, John Wilkes booth was an angry white man from Virginia. And that's broadly why he killed Abraham Lincoln.

Black survival after emancipation

00:45:24:00

CHRIS BONNER:

I think that for Black Americans, the fundamental concern in the aftermath of the Civil War, or in the early stages of their process of emancipation, the fundamental concern was survival. How are we going to feed ourselves? How and where are we going to live? Where are we going to find shelter? This is part of what draws so many Black Americans, so many freed people into the Union lines, into these “contraband” camps, into, and sort of following

General Sherman as he's marching through the South. They're looking for resources. They need tents, they need rations, they need clothing. They need the material that will allow them to live.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so, one of the things that I think shapes the choices that formerly enslaved people make in the aftermath of the civil war is trying to find ways to survive that are familiar to them. And a lot of formerly enslaved people will stick around a farm or a plantation where they had been owned, in part because they knew how to work the land. And they hoped that they might be able to do that in order to feed themselves and their families, and maybe even support themselves financially. A lot of other people I think stick around farms or plantations that they know, because they're hoping that Union officials might come through and suggest that they are entitled to some of this land.

CHRIS BONNER:

Black people understood that the wealth, the value of land on a plantation, was rooted in their labor on that land, and that they should be entitled to some remuneration for the years and decades and generations of unpaid labor that they had done. And so, one of the things that I think formerly enslaved people are hoping is that they can either be formally granted title to land, or that they will just be able to stick around on this land and make it their own in the aftermath of emancipation. And that's one of the ways that they thought first about how to help themselves survive, was by securing access to some part of the Southern landscape.

Formerly enslaved people rebuilding their lives

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CHRIS BONNER:

You know, there's a way that we could think about ranking these things, but I think it's probably clearest to say that one essential part of Black people's ideas about survival was connection with, or reconnection with their family, with their kin. That Black folks wanted, not only to be able to nourish themselves physically and support themselves in their homes, but they wanted to be able to support their families. They wanted to be able to take care of their families. And an essential part of what that required was finding their families. There are advertisements placed in Southern newspapers. There are folks wandering through the South, and looking for Union military officials in search of family from whom they had been separated.

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CHRIS BONNER:

Freed people were thinking about survival in individual terms, like "how am I going to eat today?" But they're also thinking about survival in community terms, "how are we going to live together and how are we going to find one another in order to live and sustain ourselves as a community?" And so both of these things I think were incredibly important, foundationally important, for what formerly enslaved people wanted as the war was coming to an end.

Juneteenth

00:49:06:00

CHRIS BONNER:

The celebration of Juneteenth, I think has its roots in the late arrival of the news of emancipation into Texas, and part of what happens essentially that news doesn't spread very rapidly that far across the country, and that white Southerners, that slave owners are resistant to allowing enslaved people to

get news. And so, you know, we know that enslaved people had grapevines that they moved information as they could, but somehow significant numbers of enslaved people don't find out about emancipation until well after it's actually enacted. And so this is this moment of, a striking moment for celebrations of Black liberation, when sort of these late arrivals, these latecomers to the knowledge of freedom, get that knowledge.

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CHRIS BONNER:

Juneteenth has, I think, very recently come to be seen by a lot of white Americans as a significant moment of celebration, and I think that for Black folks, I see the value, the merit of it, as a way to mark this one moment when we can see large numbers of African-Americans learning of freedom, that it's a day that ought to be celebrated.

CHRIS BONNER:

What I think has been really noticeable to me in the past year or so are how many corporations are trying to find ways into the celebration; to make advertisements for Juneteenth, to allow people to take a day off for Juneteenth. It's great! I think if people want to understand and commemorate Black history more fully than we have in the past, but I think that it's, I don't know, I can't help but feel that it's opportunistic for corporations in 2020 or 2021, or whenever it might be, to decide that in the midst of a renewed white American awareness of racism and racial inequality, we should try to respond to that with a celebration of Black life and Black stuff. It feels, I would say, a little disingenuous I think at times.

The shortcomings of the 14th Amendment

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CHRIS BONNER:

The freedom that Black Americans experienced in the Northern states before the Civil War was limited. Black people were not enslaved, but their freedom was perilous. They might be kidnapped or arrested, charged as fugitive slaves. Their freedom was tenuous. This is in some ways an analog to the freedom that was created after the Civil War, a freedom that did not necessarily entail legal equality, a freedom that did not secure to all formerly enslaved people all the rights that white Americans enjoyed. One of the things that is a hallmark of legal change in the aftermath of the Civil War is the 14th Amendment's statement that citizens are entitled to equal protection of the laws. And I think that what we can see in the history of Black life since the Civil War era is that in many cases, Black people actually don't have equal protection of the laws.

CHRIS BONNER:

They are not viewed the same by legal authorities, they are not viewed or treated the same by law enforcement, they're not entitled to the same protections of their lives as other American people are. And when their lives are taken, they're not always entitled to the same justice that other American people might expect. And so, the fight, one of the major fights of Black life since the ratification of the 14th Amendment has been to actually try to realize that principle of equality before the law. And it is not a fight that has yet been won.

Abolitionism

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Chris Bonner:

Abolitionism, the abolitionist movement orchestrated by Black and white folks largely in the North, was critically important for changing the ways that American people thought about slavery. For convincing anti-slavery moderates that slavery was evil. That slavery was a thing that brutalized Black people, that harmed Black relationships with family members, that needed to be eradicated as urgently as possible. So abolitionism was critically important for making possible, like creating the ideological context for emancipation during the Civil War era.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that sticks with me about the history of the abolitionist movement is that in 1865, when the 13th amendment is enacted and put into place, when slavery is legally outlawed in the United States, a number of abolitionists feel like their work is done. A number of white abolitionists feel like their work is done. Freedom was the goal, freedom was the project, ending slavery was the central concern, and once that has been accomplished, the work should be, their energy should move in another direction. And I think that's this really, really limited way of understanding what Black people needed, what Black people wanted, what the United States needed in order to be truly transformed. But it was a feeling that led many abolitionists to think that they didn't have a job to continue trying to do after the 13th amendment.

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CHRIS BONNER:

Douglass had long said that the Civil War had to be an abolition war. And what he said by that was not only did the Civil War need to lead to the abolition of slavery, to the freedom of 4 million bound people in the South, the Civil War, in order to be an abolition war, needed to abolish the vestiges of slavery, the foundations of slavery, it needed to take steps toward eradicating

white supremacy, and more importantly, it needed to create protections for Black people to prevent the forms of slavery from mutating, from molding, from recreating forms of racial inequality. And so for Douglass, the idea of an abolition war was about more than just ending slavery, it was about creating equality, creating justice for Black people in the United States.

Portraits of Frederick Douglass

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CHRIS BONNER:

Frederick Douglass was, this is tough. I look at pictures of Douglass a lot. One of the first things that I can think of is that Frederick Douglass had like a big face. And one of the things that's interesting about this is that I think it's reflective of his presence. Like if I'm envisioning Frederick Douglass in front of me, I feel like he's probably really close to me whether he is or not. Like, I think he was a big person, a big personality. His long gray hair, usually combed to one side, he had a broad nose, a stern demeanor I think? And these images that come down to us of Douglass, he often looks angry. He looks like he's, you know, ready for a fight, and he was. He was constantly throughout his life fighting for the end of slavery, fighting for racial justice.

CHRIS BONNER:

There's also later portraits that I can think of, that I can picture, of Douglass smiling. But even then, his smile is broad, and I think that to me, this reflects the complexity of who he was as a person. You know, we can have this image of Douglass as the fervent, fiery abolitionist always ready to give you a lecture, but I think it's also important that we recognize that part of why Douglass was so fiery as an abolitionist was because he recognized how much of Black life was harmed by slavery. And when you see him smiling,

experiencing a kind of joy, you see his understanding of how much it meant to be able to enjoy time with your family, to have leisure when you wanted it, to be able to live freely. And so seeing that joy I think helps us to make sense of Douglass' anger, Douglass' fire that we see in so many of the portraits of him.

Black Americans fight for freedom during the Civil War

00:58:04:00

CHRIS BONNER:

Over the course of the war, tens of thousands of African-American men fought in the Union military. They were critically important. Tens, and maybe even hundreds of thousands more African-Americans, did work to contribute to the Union war effort. Sometimes that work was just running away, distracting slave owners from the task of trying to wage a war against the United States. But every Black person who ran away from slavery contributed to this fight against the rebel South. What's unfortunate, and what we need to always remember, is that tens of thousands of African-Americans died in the effort to win freedom, whether it was on the battlefield at a place like Fort Wagner or Fort Pillow, whether it was in a refugee camp where they were neglected by Union officials, whether it was on the path away from a plantation where they just lost the resources to allow themselves to survive.

CHRIS BONNER:

The Civil War eventually was a war for freedom, but it was a war for a freedom that tens of thousands of African-Americans were not fully able to enjoy because of the costs of the war.

The aftermath of the Civil War

00:59:29:00

CHRIS BONNER:

The political work, the political projects that freed men, women, pursued in the aftermath of the Civil War, I think they really reflect how much enslaved people knew about the world in which they were living. Information had clearly circulated among enslaved people that the nation in which they lived was one that was supposed to be representative. Information that circulated that told them that Black and white Americans in the North were organizing conventions and that they were using these formal meeting spaces to advocate for their interests. To claim or seize rights, to advocate for the abolition of slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

Black folks in the South, very soon after the Civil War ends, they're organizing conventions on their own. They are trying to come together and take on these forms of traditional politics. To advocate for themselves, to advocate for the rights that they think are important. They did this because they knew that that was a kind of politics that was legible to white Americans, to people who were in positions of power. And so there's a way in which this rapid political mobilization of African-Americans in the era of emancipation, that that reflects longstanding, and I would say generational knowledge, that existed in enslaved communities before emancipation was even a possibility during the Civil War.

Confederate monuments

01:01:12:00

CHRIS BONNER:

The argument that I hear most often in favor of keeping Confederate monuments is that by taking them down, by destroying them, we are destroying history. I would say that that's wrong for a couple of reasons. One, the monuments, you know, a monument to Robert E. Lee that stands in Richmond does not really reflect the history of Robert E. Lee. It shows you an image of a guy on a horse, high up on a pillar in the former capital of the Confederacy. What that shows you is not a history of Robert E. Lee or of the Confederacy, it shows you an image, an idol to be worshiped. So taking down that image does not destroy the history of Robert E. Lee, a person who I talk about in history courses and offer a really complex portrait of.

CHRIS BONNER:

Another reason why this sort of idea that Confederate monuments represent history is inaccurate or incorrect is that the history that they actually reflect is not being depicted in- part of the history that they reflect is not being depicted in the monuments, right? Again, a monument to Robert E. Lee in Richmond is not a product of the Civil War era. It is not a product of Confederate veterans placing this monument there in the immediate aftermath of the war because they want to reflect on this image that they had of Lee. These images, most Confederate statues were erected in the era of Jim Crow in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries by white southerners who were trying to reassert their dominance of Black people and re-secure white supremacy by making the landscape look like it was unwelcoming to Black people. So a way to make Black southerners feel uncomfortable is to put up a bunch of statues of former Confederate soldiers. People who fought for the bondage of Black people and their ancestors.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so I think that when we take down Confederate monuments, what we do is eradicate that history of white supremacy that has been placed on the landscape of the United States, and not only in the South, but across the

country. And so I think that it's a good project to make the physical geography of the nation look like a place that is available and accessible and welcoming to the people who might move through those spaces. And statues of white supremacists, statues of men who fought for slavery, are not a way to really make that landscape open to American people.

01:04:10:00

CHRIS BONNER:

I think there is one possibility of countering Confederate memorials with statues of enslaved people, or statues of activists or abolitionists, whoever it might be, you know, a statue of Frederick Douglass next to every statue of Robert E. Lee. The problem with that is that statues and memorials and monuments do not educate. And if our goal is to help people understand the past, a bunch of idols popped up across the country, idols of Frederick Douglass, are not really going to educate people beyond saying, "Oh, Frederick Douglass was an important guy," which yes, more people should know that Frederick Douglass was an important person, but more people should also know more about Frederick Douglass. More people should also know more about Robert E. Lee. They should know more about the Confederacy and what it's cause was. The cause of slavery, the cause of white supremacy. And so if that is our project, we need to think about things other than memorials to try to convey the complex history of this country.

What we can learn from Lincoln

01:05:26:00

CHRIS BONNER:

I keep coming back to this moment when Lincoln in his last public speech says that he's starting to consider trying to find ways to make sure that Black

soldiers can have the right to vote. And what I think this reflects, that, you know, in his last moments, we can see that Lincoln is evolving, that he's developing, that he's talking about new things and new ideas and new ways to address the needs and concerns of American people. I think that that reflects who he was as a person, and offers us an interesting model to try to follow. To always be thinking about who is in need and what those needs are. To always be trying to evolve and have our ideas develop about what we should be doing for other people.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so if we can take Lincoln as a model in anything, it should be in this need for ourselves to continue to learn and try to use what we know to do better things for the people who live amongst us, or amongst whom we live. I think that we, as a nation, I would say that American people, that people in positions of power in this nation, need to continue to listen, and reflect, and try to do what is possible to respond to the needs of people who are calling on them. And that is, yeah, that's what Lincoln I think represents. I don't know how well I feel where we- how well I feel people in power are doing in that regard right now.

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