MICHELE MITCHELL
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Michele Mitchell Interview
03-15-2021
Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
Total Running Time: 01:13:41

START TC: 00:00:00:00

BARAK:

So I'm going to dive right in, if that's okay.

Colonization

00:00:15:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I think that sometimes he would use the term ironically, because he could recognize that, especially as the war really just went on and on and on and on. And I think that one thing people tend to forget, whether they consider themselves descendants of the Confederacy or the Union, is just how never-ending that war appeared to be. I also think that people don't realize that New York City, considered being sort of an open city, and that Democrats, Northern Democrats, in New York were really going after not only the Republicans but Lincoln, saying that in 1864 that if he was going to be elected, that the Republican party… As you know, it was about miscegenation, which isn't a word, this sort of non-word that emerges in the Civil War. And there's this picture of what miscegenation is, and it's the Black woman, sorry, it's a Black man, it's a Black man kissing a white woman, which says it all.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so I think that when you think about the mordant situation of living in war, in a war that in so many ways was… You could really see it on the horizon, not only in the 1850s, but in the 1840s. So it's a war that people could see coming because of the sheer contradiction of what was going on with the economy. And the North is free, but it's free and deeply, deeply, deeply funded by the profits from slavery. And you have families that part of the family lives in Philadelphia and other part of the family lives in South Carolina. You have these linkages. And so people like to think about these neat divisions and there aren't neat divisions.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so I think that someone like Lincoln coming from the part of the country he came from, that they're using irony, using a sharp wit that people who consider themselves to be educated, refined, superior, like George McClellan, aren't going to get. And George McClellan, I laugh because when I was a kid and I had not much to do in Albuquerque, I would sit in the base library and read all these books about the Civil War and about whatever. And so, some of these people were heroes to me, like George McClellan and Sherman, and in so many ways… A lot of Civil War generals on the side of the North are horrible, but Sherman's a real problem. Not just for the South. Sherman's a problem. Just he's a problem. Sheridan's a problem.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so when you think about the ways in which people could use terms, they could seem to joke, say things about inferiority and superiority, and maybe believe it, but not believe it in a way that would lead them to not have any feeling for human suffering. And anybody who grows up in the situation, like

Lincoln did where he grew up, really, really, really immiserated, really poor, is going to have an understanding of suffering that many people will not have.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so with colonization, sometimes you can even... At certain points in the antebellum period and the postbellum period, post-emancipation period, you can have African-descended people thinking, "Maybe that really is what we need to do because this just looks like it is not going to work out." And William Lloyd Garrison, who, really as much of a serious dedicated abolitionist, moral suasion, doesn't want to deal with politics because he believes that the constitution is a pro-slavery document and is corrupt. He started out with a connection to the Colonization Society. So you have Quakers who are involved in colonization. And so there's this sort of fuzziness about colonization in the early 1816, 1817, with Francis Scott Key, all these people connected to Colonization Societies. They might think that it was being benevolent to send people back to Africa, but you know… So it's so complicated.

Attributing emancipation correctly

00:04:43:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I have to say that a book that I read last year, Joseph Reidy's Illusions of Emancipation, the book is really talking about emancipation going backward and forward and just going in all sorts of different ways. That it's a mistake to even think about it as being this linear process. And so to me, it's a book that is... It's fundamentally made me rethink what the answer to the question is about Lincoln following or leading.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

In certain regards, you look at Lincoln and he is an incredibly frustrating individual. And what I mean by that, for example, you've got these Confiscation Acts that are in 1862 that could have been used to actually really seize enslaved persons, but also they could have been used to place Black men in the military. And they weren't. And I might be remembering this incorrectly, but I don't think I am, you have Frederick Douglass incredibly frustrated because it's like... He's not frustrated just because it's a question of Black military participation, he's frustrated because the war is going badly. It's looking in all sorts of ways that the North is not going to win. When you've got France and England considering throwing their support behind the Confederacy. The war starts off really on shaky ground.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And it's not only ineffective, or whatever McClellan's issue was, it's not only generals such as McClellan, it's… This bizarre way that people can think that fighting for union somehow did not mean fighting to end slavery. And that's incomprehensible. If you're fighting for union in this situation, it's automatically a fight to end slavery. Because of just these deep rifts that the sectional crisis, basically, even since 1848, when you've got people after the war with Mexico and when the United States gains more or less what was half of Northern Mexico. And you've got some of these same figures, who you really can call racist, like John Calhoun, talking about, we don't want to incorporate mongrels.

Lincoln's evolving views on slavery and race

00:07:23:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I have to say, in all honesty, I'm really not sure. Because there is a way that he is by, let's say, after the Dred Scott decision, there are ways in which he's not necessarily a William Lloyd Garrison, he's not necessarily a Wendell Phillips, he's not necessarily a Charles Sumner, or a Thaddeus Stevens. However, he is not with where a great bulk of northerners are. And there's this cartoon with the election of 1860 that has this four man race, and Lincoln is portrayed as the long-legged abolitionist.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so it depends on what you mean by abolition. And I think that, I'll try to distill this, what I mean by that is you have abolition that could be gradual. You have emancipation that could be gradual. So in states… If we go back to the Revolutionary War, Massachusetts ended immediately, I think 1783. There's a freedom suit, Elizabeth Freeman, or Mumbet. There's a freedom suit. And there's, I think it's... Is it Quock Walker? I can't remember. But you have these African-descended individuals who have these freedom suits and Massachusetts ends it.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania are different matters because slavery after the Revolutionary War is significant enough to their economies that they want to keep... they don't necessarily want to let it go. So gradual emancipation, when it gets down to New York, New York technically decides in 1827, okay, this is it. Pennsylvania decides this is it. But you have gradual emancipation unfold in ways that you have enslaved people in New Jersey for a really long period of time. Some scholars argue up until the 1850s, the decade before the Civil War.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so it's like, what is emancipation? That's the question. What is abolition? And so when you get into this murkiness, I think with Lincoln, it is really hard to have easy answers. You can think of any thinkers, I wrote this piece on Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and she is a really complex figure. And it's really difficult to get a view of her thought by just grabbing pieces. And with Lincoln, you can't just grab pieces, you have see how things evolve and you have to think about context. Yeah.

The Emancipation Proclamation

00:09:59:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

It is so hard to stay in this period because it can be shocking to think about the Civil War and not talk about how violent, violent, what was going on in Kansas was. It was called Bleeding Kansas. People are massacring each other over the question of slavery. There's Free Soilers, and William Lloyd Garrison refers to it as white manism. He's like, this is not about abolition. And so again, there's this whole question of free soil, freedom, abolition, it doesn't necessarily mean the same thing to all people.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So fast forward to the Emancipation Proclamation. By the time it's written, when it's written, there are things about it that are radical because in some regards it's a last ditch effort. In other regards, in the context, it is a radical document because it endorsed, in many regards, what had already been going on, enslaved people fleeing to Union lines and seeking their own freedom, from the minute the war starts. So you've got these contraband camps all

over the place. You've got people running behind Union lines. You've got to the point that some of these generals are going, what do we do with these people? And it's not just Black women accompanying men in the service, because that takes a while. So you've got... They're fleeing.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so the Emancipation Proclamation builds on what's in the Confiscation Acts. With the first one technically being property that would be humans, and the second one technically being land but also humans and anything else. And it's that second one that is really critical to look at and think about it as being a precursor of sorts to the Emancipation Proclamation. And so when it's issued, at the time it's issued, and you have African-descended people like Frederick Douglass, who could be very critical of Lincoln, talking about what it was like to be there on Watch Night, right before this is going to happen.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And we read things about people talking about how they feel to be able to witness the day, amidst so much uncertainty, with real emotion. And just talking about, just feeling this rush through them. That can't help but have been a radical document if it created that sort of an emotion.

Enslaved people's growing political awareness and organizing

00:12:53:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

A number of enslaved people were not the ignorant field hands that people wish to reduce enslaved people to. There were a whole range of enslaved people. And I'm still just talking about people who are African-descended.

And so a number of people might not have been fully literate, but they had seized what they could to figure things out. You do have instances of people who are enslaved being able to write letters, in a situation where it was illegal to instruct people in bondage to read and write. And people could do that, Frederick Douglass does this himself. People getting a fugitive education. I think that Susie King Baker, the nurse, Susie King Baker, I believe that her grandmother sees to it that she gets a smattering of education so that she has some literacy. And this is when the war... early on.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so you have Black people who are aware of things, you have Black people who know things. And we also have to remember, and again, this is one reason why it's really hard to take the 1850s out of it, because with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, you have people fleeing to Canada, immigrationists, because that's the safest thing to do. And so that document, the enabling of the fact that that document would make it so that any person in the North who might not want to aid a fugitive slave catcher, if they did not do so, not only could they be fined, they could be jailed.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so, again, I know I'm giving you these long-winded answers, but there really is… For me as an historian, in order to really understand the Civil War, you have to understand the 1850s. When you've got a senator being clubbed on the floor of the Senate to the point that he's... I think Charles Sumner couldn't return to the Senate for three years. So that is a violent thrashing.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

It's hard to even separate it from the 1830s, when you think about, whatever racial attitudes he might've had, this editor, Elijah Lovejoy, who in Alton, Illinois, they are burning his press, they are threatening him, and he keeps going and going back and going back and going back. And the man knows it was going to get him killed, and it does.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so we can maybe look at Lincoln askance and think, well, he didn't do this, he didn't do that. But I also think it's important to think about him as being, on the East Coast at that time, an outsider. He came from the frontier. Sometimes I read things, documents that you see that he has the prejudices of the day. You see that he's not really sure that Black people are the equal of whites. He's not really sure about fortitude and intellectual capacity. But he also does not dehumanize in the way that was not only common in the South, in the Midwest, in the North, in the West.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

People also forget that you had states before the Civil War in the Midwest, territories in the West, that really effectively had laws saying, we do not want Black people here. Oregon territory. Varying degrees in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio.

Lincoln's upbringing

00:17:06:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Some historians, I think David Herbert Donald argued that Lincoln's parents belonged to a sect of Baptists. And it was a sect of Baptists that thought that slavery was wrong. They were anti-slavery, not necessarily abolitionists, but

they were anti-slavery. In that case, it's not necessarily not wanting to compete with slave holders. If you think about the fact that he comes from that context, possibly, or probably, or he comes from that context. And as a young man, he sees the horrors of what goes on auction blocks. The one thing that's clear is that he might have shared many of the prejudices of the day, but it was also clear that he could see that these things were so sickeningly wrong when a shocking range of people normalized them.

Black Union soldiers

00:18:20:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

With Black soldiers, you have the Corps d'Afrique in New Orleans, and these are men of color, and they think that they're going to fight for New Orleans. They want to do this. And the Confederacy is like, "Nope". The Confederacy turns them away and some of those men eventually fight for the Union. When the Civil War breaks out, the War Department is like, "This fight is not your fight," to African-descended men. So by the time they're needed, which is when the war is not going that well, they're angry and some of them are like, "You've got to be kidding me." Frederick Douglas does this, others too, Sojourner Truth, others too, they go and they recruit. For something like the Massachusetts 54th, they're recruiting in New York, not only Massachusetts, but they're recruiting all over the place.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Something that I found out in a conversation earlier this year, due to work that I'm doing on the current program committee for the OAH, a lot of the men in the Massachusetts 54th, they're African-descended, but they're also

indigenous because coming from New England, so they're New England Blacks. And because of the presence of indigenous people all throughout the East Coast, some of these Black men in the Massachusetts 54th, they are Black men, but they're also indigenous. And so, you've got some people who have a really complicated and powerful motivation for wanting to fight.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

When you think about the ways in which, not only Black people or African-descended people being dehumanized, but indigenous people being slaughtered and butchered in ways just beyond sickening, for a surprisingly long time in our history. There are these ways in which people have various motivations to fight and... Douglas, two of his sons, it's Frederick, who does not serve, so it's Charles and Louis. And it's Louis who is promoted to sergeant major I believe. Charles is the younger son. You look at their letters and when they're writing to their... I think it's Louis who's writing to his wife…

BARAK:

[inaudible 00:20:39].

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Yeah. It had to have been both a tremendous source of pride that you're able to do this, and you're going to prove a point, and I mean, really prove a point, because they did.

The connection between enslavement and federal indigineous policies

00:21:06:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I'll start post-war and I'll do that for a reason. I'm going to start with Hampton Institute. Hampton Institute, Southern Workman. The Hampton Institute, if you look at that, that publication, in many cases, they're talking about the problem with the problem with indigenous people and the problem with former slaves as being the same thing. There are indigenous students at that school. And the thing that is, again, often erased or effaced or forgotten, is the overlap between African-descendant people and indigenous people. Especially, when you think about… I mean really, throughout the country. But when you're thinking about certain parts of the South... But also New England. Also, New England. There's really pretty deep overlap.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

When we think about the enslavement that African-descended people endured, it seems unprecedented. The reason why I mentioned this is because it's really relevant here. I'm from New Mexico. New Mexico is one of the last states admitted in 1912, but it's one of the oldest, continuously inhabited places in the Americas. It's old.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

James Brooks wrote this amazing book, Captives and Cousins. He's talking about basically slavery, among in indigenous people and settlers, indigenous people and indigenous people. And he, very wisely link. It links it to... Excuse me. He very wisely links it to how historians have talked about slavery in Africa, in West Africa and other parts of Africa, where you have populations or places that endure plunder, violence, raids for various reasons. And it's not necessarily only... People tend to think, "Oh, it's European colonists doing this. Raiding these indigenous people in Africa or in the Americas."

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And again, people tend to forget that at that point, people are not thinking, "Oh, we're all one". They're like, "You are my enemy. You are a different people. You are a different tribe." You have Indians seeming to enslave each other. You have Africans seeming to enslave each other. And so James Brooks, early on in the book, he looks at the scholarship of a range of Africanists who talk about how… Not to say that that form of enslavement was not bad. Not to say that it did not take people away from their loved ones, but there is a very important difference between that and chattel slavery that develops in early capitalism. We're talking about situations where people are raiding and taking outsiders because they want to replenish. They have suffered raids. They've they've had lost. And so, they are taking and enslaving other people for forms of survival.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

It's not to say that it's not enslavement. But here's the key difference. Both in the Southwest borderlands in Africa, the people who would be enslaved, their descendants would not necessarily be enslaved. People could be incorporated into societies in ways that we could not fathom, with chattel slavery during the Antebellum period, especially during the Antebellum period. It's this situation, Africanists refer to it as wealth in persons. That you're not necessarily thinking about in individuals as a form of property that is akin to an animal. You're instead thinking about wealth and persons as being, we need people to replenish ourselves. We need people to survive. And again, it's not that there aren't distinctions because you will have some Africanists argue that, you know, people can be incorporated much longer than you might think. People can remember, "Oh, well you descended from a slave." It's

complex. And in the Southwest, you also had, in some cases, with indigenous people taking Europeans.

00:25:27:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

In some ways, when you think about various parts of this country that are very old. For example, where we are now Lower Manhattan, really old. You think about people interacting for various periods of time. Some of these categories really don't make sense in earlier periods because it's not an either or. It really isn't. And then, when you think about something like the Trail of Tears… as slavery. When the Atlantic slave trade stops, the internal slave trade picks up. And what does that mean, Andrew Jackson. It's like pushing them on out. The Trail of Tears pushing all these indigenous people, making them walk to Indian territory with what is now Oklahoma, from the Southeast, walking? Walking?

MICHELE MITCHELL:

It is hard not to get emotional here, because there's this real debate going on in my home state about Oñate. And when I go home, I go and I visit various missions. Some of those missions, some of them ruins. But some of them were built in the 16th century. And there are some of them… I think it's Salinas monuments there. If you go outside of Albuquerque and then go down towards Mountainair, they're out in the middle of nowhere, really. And you read the history about it and you see these really pretty large structures and what's left of these monuments there. There's a sign. They're built by enslaved women and children. Children.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And also, Nehemias. They're really spectacular but... Especially, oh my God, out where the Gran Quivara is. It's hot out there. It's probably hotter out there now than it was then. But it's hot out there. In New Mexico, there's this revolt, the Acoma Revolt if you want to call it that. But Oñate, the Spanish Conquistador, slaughters at least a thousand indigenous people. He then mames and or enslaves three to four to 500 more. The man was so violent that Spain kicked him out of New Mexico. That's pretty bad.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So, when you think about... And I understand why people, to get to Lincoln, I understand why they're upset about the commutation of the 200 sentences, but then 30 some were still left to die. It's horrible. It is horrible. But again, if you think about context, I'm not excusing it, because it is horrible. It's heartbreaking. It is especially heartbreaking to me. It is heartbreaking. And there are ways in North America, and I'm going to say the United States that what happened with indigenous people, First Nations people in Canada, they have their own traumas, but there's a way in which a number of first Nations people in Canada, they're like, "You know what happened in the United States is horrible. Horrible.'

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I don't think that people really think about the logic of having a state out in the middle of the ocean. Why are we in Hawaii? Why? Because the U.S government over threw the sovereign queen, that's why. Why are we in Alaska? Why are we in Puerto Rico? Why are we in Samoa? So you think about all these things.

00:29:34:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I'm not minimizing it, but there are so many massacres of indigenous people, the Camp Grant massacre, Wounded Knee. There are so many horrible massacres. I don't even want to begin to compare it to slavery. And I understand, because again, indigenous people endured a form of slavery. African-descended people have endured slaughter. You can't compare these things. And I get so angry when people are trying to make comparisons to slavery with the Holocaust. It's like that… What happened in the 20th century in Europe is revolting. Revolting, revolting, and revolting. Making lampshades out of people's skin? Doing all sorts of stuff? Just revolting.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

When you think about race riots that involved… or lynchings that involved Chinese workers, Italian immigrants in Louisiana and the way that their bodies could be mutilated in ways not all that different from how we think about the mutilation of Black victims of lynching. You can't compare them. They are… abuses of the worst sort. Any abuse that enables people to even conceive of just doing absolutely sickening things. Like in World War II, soldiers posing with heads of Asian people. War is horrible.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

My father was a source of mobility. He went to Korea after the Korean war. He had to go to Southeast Asia when I was a kid. I'm born in 1965. So, not a good time to go. He didn't stay long, but for a number of people, you didn't have to be there long.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

There's this eerie recall with what happened in Africa, taking enslaved people from... I shouldn't even say enslaved people at that point, they're captured people. They're in coffles, and it might be a coffle that might be wood, sort of connecting people. It might be chains. When you think about what is now the United States placing people in coffles and making them walk, it's horrific. Let's just take the story of Juneteenth, which is pretty misunderstood in some ways. It's not that it took that long for word to get out to Texas. It's that you have these recalcitrant Southern slaveholders, mostly in Mississippi and Louisiana and Alabama, who are like, "We're holding onto our enslaved property," and they take these people and walk them to Texas. And there are already enslaved people there. And you have some historians argue and you might want to look at this. Some historians argue that at the end of the Civil War, you have some slaveholders who decided to go to Brazil.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so to Texas, taking people there so that they can hold onto their property. Texas is, it's the frontier of the United States. California is a state, but at that point, it's sort of like New Mexico Territory and Utah Territory. They're not states. So you could go out to Texas, and there's a war going on there. You have Civil War battles in what's now New Mexico. There's a war going on, but you don't have the same presence of the federal government. You don't have the same oversight.

00:33:38:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So it's finally on June 19th that Granger is basically reading this proclamation saying, "Time's up. This is it. You really have to let go of these people. This is it." So it's not this it took that long. It's another matter. And that's the other

thing. I'm glad that you mentioned the sort of… Well, not glad, but it's important to mention how people are moving through the internal slave trade. In some cases, people are going on riverboats. Dred and Harriet Scott, they go on... They're on riverboats at points. One of their daughters, I think, is born on a boat. So sometimes people are on boats, but an awful lot of time they're walking.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

They're walking. They might be in a wagon. Melton McLaurin, this book Celia, a Slave, he's talking about this instance of a young woman who is purchased when she's about 14. And she's in a wagon, and the man purchases her for his concubine. He immediately rapes her. He does all these things. She bears him multiple children. She finally kills him. And he argues, McLaurin argues very persuasively that there are ways that that case is every bit as significant as Dred Scott, because the reason why Celia is executed is that it is decided that it is impossible to rape an enslaved woman.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And throw that back to Thomas Jefferson, where in Notes on the State of Virginia, where... No, it might not be Notes. But Thomas Jefferson argues at a certain point that, yes, in terms of being evaluated on the market, the sort of price tag that's attached, male laborers tend to cost a little bit more money. But Thomas Jefferson writes that he realizes that it's the women that are really the bargain because you can get them cheaper, and they add value because they can bear children.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So it's the logic of capitalism in early form, but essentially the same thing, kind of the same thing that we've got now. But it's thinking about profits, and it's thinking about profits through human flesh. And it's thinking about profits not only through human flesh. It's thinking about profits with cotton. And cotton, US cotton, Southern cotton is... It's going to New England textile mills. It's going over to Europe. And some scholars have argued that the much-craved Egyptian cotton of the… sort of as a, oh, this is Egyptian cotton. You can go to Bed Bath and Beyond. Some scholars argue that that sort of notion of Egyptian cotton, it comes up during the Civil War because people who need it around the world are like, "We've got to get cotton from somewhere."

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So you've got cotton. You've got all the ways in which insurance houses in northern cities, such as New York, are underwriting enslaved property. You've got factories that are making sort of slave goods, like sort of cheap clothing, cheap shoes. There are all sorts of ways in which the economies are separate, but they're also entwined. I mean, the southern economy is, it's right-out, full-out, full-bore dependent on slavery. But the northern economy was fueled by it as well in terms of the profits that could be made, in terms of the extraction of wealth. Yeah.

The gradual acceleration towards the goal of emancipation

00:37:33:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I think both enslaved people, formerly enslaved people who might be considered fugitives, and free people of color, that they realized that they

built this country, which is why so many of them so strenuously objected to colonization. And when they thought about leaving the country, they made a distinction that it was emigration. I mean, seriously, they're like, "This is every bit of our country." And they see themselves as citizens. Dred Scott and his wife, they see themselves as citizens, even though Taney declares that, no, that's not the case.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So Black people see themselves as citizens. I don't know whether or not... There's a way in which democracy, using that term in this context, is both really rich with meaning and... Yeah, it's rich with meaning. When you think about some of the initial images that come out after the Civil War, Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner, and you have... I think it's 1866, Thomas Nast, and you've got all sorts of people, immigrants, Black people, native-born, whites, women sitting around the table, and it's universal suffrage. It's not universal manhood suffrage. It's universal suffrage.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

In Reconstruction, you've got the question of citizenship and democracy complicated by the fact that California had its own fugitive slave law. Black people had gone out there. It's complicated by the fact, in Reconstruction, that Reconstruction out there very much involves indigenous people and Asian workers. And so the question of democracy is complicated because we tend to think about democracy involving the government and office-holding. You have people of color. I'm not only going to say enslaved people, but you have people of color. They understand that they have a voice, and they have a right.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I mean, people really forget this with the 14th Amendment. The vast majority of indigenous people do not get citizenship with that. They don't get citizenship until 1924. They get citizenship if they are not taxed, which means if they are not living on a reservation, which means if they are assimilated. And when they're all... Basically, in an era in which... So basically, they don't have citizenship. So in that circumstance with the first people of the land in that sort of situation, how can you talk about democracy?

MICHELE MITCHELL:

But you can talk about democracy because people of color, and this includes Asian migrants who are working and building that Transcontinental Railroad, the land is theirs because they work it. And when you work it, that makes it yours. That means you've got a say. So that makes it democracy, and it's a different understanding of democracy. And that's why people who want to claim a white nationalist view of this is our country, it's like... And then Tucker Carlson saying that he doesn't know what white nationalism is, it's like that is just beyond disingenuous. You embody white nationalism. You embody it. You breathe it. That is what you are. So you know what it is.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

White nationalists... Not even white nationalists. Nazis, all sorts of people who are fascist, they know what they are. And so, you have a whole range of people who are unlettered, who are immigrants, who are ignorant. They know what democracy is, and they know how to make it work for them because they have done it for hundreds of years. That's why we're here. They've done it. So they know what democracy is. It's in their bones. It's our birthright. All of us, it's our birthright.

Slave narratives

00:41:33:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Let's just say slave narratives. It is striking how many of them by women and men talk about sexual exploitation. They talk about families being ripped apart. And virtually during the antebellum period, if you were enslaved, you were going to lose a family member at some point. It was just going to happen. And so, you have Elizabeth Keckley who makes such a fleeting reference to the fact that she has a son, and she has a son because she's raped. And it's a very fleeting reference.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

People are more familiar with the story about Harriet Jacobs, and they tend to forget her abolitionist work. Elizabeth Keckley, they tend to forget that she was involved in all sorts of activism. But you see these references, and there's this really painful document, Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon. And I think it's Mattison. It is not really a slave narrative because this woman is illiterate, and she, by all intents and purposes, appears white. But she is the octoroon, so she is white, so she has whiteness. But it is beyond clear from reading that, that she's exploited in really horrible ways.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And you have Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown. You have Frederick Douglass. You have all sorts of slave narratives that are written by men and women, that if you look and if you read, they're heartbreaking in terms of the exploitation. People seeing their… Men seeing their wives being violated, and they can't do anything about it.

Confederate statues

00:43:22:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Well, this is one reason why I actually… I'm so glad that you asked this question, because this really is the reason why I tend to believe that, with the exception of some really problematic figures like Oñate, I tend to believe that monuments have a real role in education. So one of the ways that I learned a lot as a kid, because in Albuquerque in the '70s there wasn't much to do, so I learned a lot, was by walking around and reading things.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And when I got to college... I went to Mount Holyoke, and I was in New England for the first time. And so I would go to graveyards, and I would read things, and I would go to monuments. When I would go to Boston, I would read, I would look. And I have to say that it gave me… When I went down to, when I was a fellow at the Woodson Institute in Charlottesville, when I was in New Orleans doing Behind the Veil, all sorts of places, in Ann Arbor that has this really interesting Black community. This was one AME... All sorts of stuff that if you just walk around and just read monuments or just read what's in the places, you can just learn a lot.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And back home, you can learn really interesting things about where WPA things were built, where they hadn't been before. So the reason why I have... I completely recognize that some of the figures that monuments have been built to, like Phil Sheridan, who was no friend to indigenous people, all sorts

of people were no friend to Black people, Asian people, women, I mean, all sorts of people, really problematic figures. One reason why I think that… Like, with the J. Marion Sims statue that they moved from Central Park, the doctor who did these gynecological operations on enslaved women, and so I understand why people wanted that moved, but there's also a reason to say, "Leave it there. Have a plaque and explain what it's about."

MICHELE MITCHELL:

People being opposed to Columbus in Columbus Circle, learning that it was put up at a time when Italians were not necessarily viewed in a positive way. And so, yes, Columbus has a problematic history, to be sure, but there's a way in which you can learn things. Murals, I mean, oh my God, I learned so much from just looking at WPA murals, where they're left, like up in Harlem, all sorts of places. So you can learn things and you can learn why something like the debates about the mural that they... about whether or not to cover it up in San Francisco. I understand why people are upset about things. I really do. I really do. But there's a way in which it's like, "Okay, let's take a moment and talk about and think about why this wasn't considered problematic. Let's think about what this actually means. Does it have a different meaning then than it does now?" And just having those discussions, you can learn a lot.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And for me, and I will shut up after this, but for me, coming from New Mexico, I came from a... Because my dad was in the military, he went back to school. He went to college, not back to school. He went to college after he got out of the military, and he worked his way. He did all sorts of jobs, and so he ended up at the FAA. And I went to college, but... And I went to college, and I got a decent package at Mount Holyoke, but my dad wasn't paying for it.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So one way in which I supplemented my education, coming from a part of the country that many people felt then and still feel is deficient, is by looking at monuments. And in places like New York, where they're in multiple languages, in places like in Louisiana, places where you really can learn a lot... For some people, yeah, these monuments are problematic, but they also can be a real free education. And for people who can really sort of grasp really pretty quickly why it's problematic, that sort of free education, there's something to be said for that. Well, it's not free, but you get my point.

"Whitemanism"

00:47:37:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I think that at the time, reading a number of the writings of Black abolitionists, some Black abolitionists felt that in terms of the abolition movement, the leading lights, Gerrit Smith, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, a number of them felt that Wendell Phillips perhaps had the very least amount of the tinge of sort of a color prejudice in terms of treating... And one reason why... I mean, I really admire William Lloyd Garrison, but scholars know very well about the tension that developed between Garrison and Douglass when Douglass started his own publication and when Douglass moved away from Moral Suasion and moved towards politics.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Garrison, though, to refer to the Constitution as a pro-slavery rag, and I think that's literally the words that he used, to talk about free soil being white manism, when people realize that when he was speaking, he almost got

lynched. And I believe that what basically saved him is that he might've been arrested for disturbing the peace. I mean, it's something ludicrous like that. I mean, it's not ludicrous, but... And in Philadelphia, they're burning the buildings of abolitionists. They're turning things over.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so being an abolitionist, especially Garrisonian abolitionism, which is very different from the abolitionism after the Revolutionary period... I mean, Quakers were really important, but there's a way... They were, but you have more of an ambivalence after the Revolutionary War about abolitionism, that it's just like, "This is wrong, but we really don't want you here." Or "This is wrong, but..." So you have all these... And then you have the American Colonization Society, 18-teens, and all these state colonization societies.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

But with Garrison and with these other people, they really… I mean with Lovejoy, it's a perfect example. They were risking their lives making these arguments, literally. And so not a perfect man, but really, really fascinating because really risking their lives because, I mean, Elijah Lovejoy was killed. And William Lloyd Garrison was... And Frederick Douglas. I think Frederick Douglas, I think somewhere in upstate New York, he barely escaped a mob. I mean, this stuff was real.

Michele Mitchell:

So there are a number of figures in the antebellum period through the Civil War and after the Civil War that they made important decisions. But there are some people that they make decisions and they stick by them and you wouldn't necessarily expect it. And that's the case with Ulysses Grant from

the West. Ulysses Grant started federal investigations of the Klan. So those investigations, I mean, they didn't really end the Klan. I mean, they ended it, but it really kind of just went underground. But that's why there's a first and a second Klan. So the second Klan is 19-teens. So Ulysses Grant investigated the Klan.

The Ku Klux Klan

00:50:50:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

The formation of the Klan is incredibly quick upon the ending of the war. And I kind of chuckle because it comes from kuklos. And so kuklos… It's sort of like clan clan clan when you break it down, Ku Klux Klan. So it comes from, I think it's a Greek word, kuklos, which means clan. And so it's kind of... Yeah. So one of the things that sticks out to me from the very old documentary at this point, Ken Burns's The Civil War, is when Shelby Foote says, "There's a point when Nathan Bedford Forrest, who is no friend to any person of color, quits because the Klan became too violent for him." So that really says something about how horrible the Klan was.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And if you read these testimonies that I have my students read, that Herbert Aptekar collected a long time ago, and you have people talking about... This one woman talks, she knows who the man is. The man says that he wants to have his way with her, wants to do with her. And she refuses. And she describes that he effectively tries to reach up inside of her and pull her womb down. And so she talks about it's so painful that she can't walk sometimes.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so that the Klan is engaging in violence after the Civil War with Black people who are voting and Black people who are thinking about the vote as a community property, because only Black men can vote. They're targeting entire families and people... This other woman talking about her husband being shot, and she's watching him breathing. And she's talking about with every breath there are blood and brains coming out over his eyes. And so it's just horrible stuff.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So the Klan is targeting Black people. It's targeting their allies, who are carpetbaggers or scalawags, but there's a difference between the first Klan and the second Klan. The second Klan is going after everybody. They are going after immigrants. They are going after Catholics. They're going after Jewish Americans. They're going after everybody. The second Klan is a different beast. I'm not saying that the first Klan isn't bad because the first Klan does horrible things. There's a continuity, but there's also a way that the second Klan underscores the deep nativism that is in this country by the 1920s.

The Fort Pillow Massacre

00:53:18:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

When you think about the fact that apparently Fort Pillow was not of great military significance for the Confederacy, and for Bedford Forrest to, rather than taking the soldiers as prisoners of war, killing them, it's just… It's so sickening because, and Civil War scholars know this better than I do, the

prison camp in the Confederacy is hell on Earth. The prison camp in the Confederacy for Union soldiers is hell on Earth. Andersonville, I think.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so to slaughter them... And when you think about the reaction of the Union, this is where it becomes a little... It's important to sort of read about the reaction of the Union. That for all the issues that were going on in terms of the Union, these Copperheads in Ohio who want to support the Confederacy, Copperheads in New York City who support the Confederacy, apparently people smuggling enslaved people into the United States during the war itself, when you think about all that going on, and the Union is like, "This is an outrage. We will not participate in prisoner exchanges," again, you think about what is going on, and the reaction of the Union to that moment, I think, is telling in terms of it being something so disgusting and vile that it resonated with more people in the Union than one might think.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And here I will use the word, and I know that it's a word that people don't... But I think I need to use the word. A lot of people were outraged with the Emancipation Proclamation, the fact that Lincoln was even thinking about it in the fall of 1862. They're saying, "You're going to turn this sacred cause of Union into war for the nigger."

MICHELE MITCHELL:

When you think about what happened in this city during the New York City draft riots and Black people being hung, Carmine Street, Clarkson Street, I walk by these places every day, orphanages being burned, people being terrorized. So the war, in certain regards, definitely comes North for many

citizens. And so when you think about all that's going on and the horror of something like Fort Pillow being a turning point of sorts, where people are like, "This is revolting," it speaks to... And I think that this gets to something about Lincoln and Grant, is for all of their potential flaws, as we all have, there's a deep abiding morality, where it's like, "This is just wrong."

Black women abolitionists

00:56:37:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Well, I think that we need to go... And this is my understanding, that we will look at her name and say, Maria, but it's my understanding that it's Mariah Stewart. So you have Maria Stewart in the 1830s, a close associate of David Walker. And she's speaking out. She's acknowledged by many scholars as being the first woman, period, to address a promiscuous audience, meaning an audience of men and women.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And she's in Boston, and she is saying... She's saying to men, "You need to do this." She's saying to women, "I want you to possess the spirit of men." She is not looked upon kindly because she is saying, "We need to do this," and she's outspoken, and that's not necessarily appreciated.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Sojourner Truth is somebody really important to think about as somebody who was unlettered. But people think about her as being unlettered. They don't think about her as being multilingual. Her first language was Dutch. And this is someone who, because of New York being New Amsterdam, her

first language is Dutch. So to get out there and talk and speak and argue and make points in the way that she did, incredibly brave.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

When you think about... I'm trying to remember which woman it is that talks about... Oh, this is actually later in the century. Amanda Berry Smith, I think, talks about being on Bleecker Street and feeling really, really mortified because the only way that she can support herself is effectively to work in a house of prostitution. And she's a preaching woman at the end of the century. But the sort of bravery that it took women, that it took Harriet Tubman, incredible fortitude. I know a little bit less about Mary Miles Bibb. Harry Bibb's, his first wife is lost to him. So I know less about Mary Miles Bibb, but one woman that I do know about and admire is Mary Shadd Cary.

00:58:55:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Mary Shadd Cary, a publisher. She goes to Chatham. She goes to Ontario West, I think, but anyway, Canada. And so she's publishing a newspaper and for people still to take her seriously as either having nationalist politics or not, they don't take her seriously. And this is a woman who ... The Provincial Freeman, an incredibly important newspaper, comes back to the United States I think during or after, in Washington, DC, goes to Howard University Law School, sues for the right to vote. These are women who are spectacularly brave at a time when women could not vote because in a very real sense, women were considered their husband's property. That's something that is both profoundly meaningful and meaningless for people of African descent, because all people of African descent, especially being enslaved as if they're property.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So with Harriet Jacobs, I'm getting my facts a little fuzzy from Jean Fagan Yellen's book. She's working with her daughter. Her son, I think, I don't know, I can't remember whether or not he fights, but I think her son is lost to her. I can't remember, but she's partnered with her daughter. Her story, it's so much more complicated than how it's often presented.

01:00:36:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

Edmonia Lewis is someone who embodies this overlap between Black and indigenous. And she's this amazing artist who I think there are ways in which scholars have really yet to fully wrap their brains around the existence of Edmonia Lewis with that sort of talent with that heritage. I really don't think because again, there are ways in which the histories of indigenous people and African-descended people are very distinct, and scholars who work on indigenous histories in the United States rightly become very frustrated because a certain African-American civil rights narrative is imposed on various people of color. And so when you have Asian-descended people and Latinx people, Mexican, but not only Mexican but Puerto Rican, all sorts of people, where it's immigration, it's language. With indigenous people, it's questions of sovereignty.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so the, the histories are similar, but they're very different. And so it's questions of sovereignty, but there's a way in which with boarding schools, with indigenous people and various schools for African-descended people, that there is that civilizing mission to civilize them both in a certain manner. That is very similar, incredible violence in terms of loss of language, loss of

culture, loss of identity, having to present yourself in one way, if you were just going to survive. And the similar but different ways, the profound psychological damage to have to exist in those sorts of circumstances. And so Edmonia Lewis, I would just say, I think there is so much work that needs to be done on her to try to get at that.

Lincoln's funeral train

01:02:57:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

The thing I would say about his funeral train, how the nation responds. But the thing to me that is most telling is how a whole range of Black people, African-descended people respond, and it's with deep sorrow. And… The thing about being a historian that can be really difficult sometimes is to be able to try to place yourself in a moment when you don't know what the outcome is going to be. And of course we know what the outcome is, more or less, as much as you can ever recover it.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so when he was assassinated, so much was up in the air as to what was going to happen. And not only was so much in the air, we have to remember who his vice president was. Andrew Johnson, who is a Southern Unionist from Tennessee. He hates slavery, but he mostly hates the slave holding class. And so in turn, when you've got military reconstruction that starts during the civil war itself, we can think about the confiscation acts. We can think about the Emancipation Proclamation. You've got presidential reconstruction under Johnson when he is doing everything to frustrate what the radical Republicans are going to do. It's during this time period that these

Confederate States enact these Black Codes that restrict the mobility. He is literally just frustrating everything and is allowing all sorts of things and is pardoning people. I mean, he's just completely gumming up the works in so many ways. So there's a reason why that man had an impeachment trial. And then you've got this longest period of time, radical reconstruction, radical Republicans.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And in the context, they were. Because they are trying to do things that will open up the door to citizenship, the naturalization, the 1790 naturalization act, whatever it is in the constitution, that really is like, the people who can become citizens are white people. So with the reconstruction era amendments, it opens that door to African-descended people. It kind of opens the door a little bit to indigenous people, Asian migrant workers, they possibly could be included, but you could see again, Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving dinner, they possibly could be included, but the deep anti-Asian sentiment is already present in the 1860s. That leads up to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. So that's already there.

01:06:06:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

You also have the 15th amendment giving the vote to Black men. And yes, it's limited in terms of not giving the vote to women, but the New York Historical Society has on their website, the center for women's history. I think it's a draft of the 15th or the 14th, that had language in it that would have allowed for the enfranchisement of women. So we need to think about these reconstruction era amendments as being works in progress at the time. And the 14th amendment, I consider it… so 13th abolishes slavery forever, sort of.

14th, citizenship. 15th, the franchise. The 14th amendment with its equal protection clause is such a living Reconstruction Era amendment. And in the context of today, it's such a living Reconstruction Era amendment because that's where there's birthright citizenship.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

So as much as you've got this, 1790 naturalization act that's white people. And with the 14th amendment saying that former slaves, it also has that birthright citizenship that, if you're born here, you're a citizen. So you have Asian immigrants during the era of exclusion, being able to use that sometimes successfully, sometimes not. 1920s, not so much, but earlier on say like, Wong Kim Ark if I'm not mistaken. Same era as Plessy versus Ferguson, is able, shockingly to use the 14th amendment in an era in which separate but equal is enshrined, to be able to use the 14th amendment to say I'm a citizen and have the Supreme Court say yes. It's a surprising thing. And the 14th amendment goes, it's affirmative action cases. And as we know, from living through what we've lived through, the recent occupant of the white house was trying to raise this birthright citizenship question again, revising the 14th amendment, removing it.

The January 6th insurrection

01:08:38:00

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I think living what we've lived through, most people... a lot of people in this country, because they lived through it, there are not so many of them now, they understand what it's like to see a Mussolini or Hitler come to power. They understand now. If people couldn't get that in their brains before what

happened on the sixth? And then for people to try to blame on Antifa and BLM, when you've got people who are wearing all sorts of, "6 million were not enough," we're not talking racist, we're talking Nazis. Nazis. And that the picture of the guy? Nazis!

MICHELE MITCHELL:

And so, if people can't get it in their brains that fetishizing this cult of personality of an individual who, I'm not going to say anything about his intelligence because I don't know, but in the public realm, but you look at him, and it's like "This man acts like a moron!" And literally, and I don't use that word lightly because it's a horrible word.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

It's an offensive word, but that's what he acts like. And it's just, you watch him and then to make fun of people of color, immigrants and you're speaking like a cretin? If people don't get how the existence of such an individual and people excusing what happened, people educated at Princeton and Stanford excusing what happened, lawyers who are smart, excusing what happened? We are in a bad bad space because this stuff can not be excused. There is no excuse for it. There is no excuse for it. There are people. And I say this from seeing some really poor people and some really sad things. This one community where I did field work in Louisiana in terms of the politics of Louisiana, I won't say much or where it was. But basically inbreeding had gone on so much that you had people with all sorts of deformities.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I've seen people traumatized, incredibly poor children who just rock in place. You can reach them and you can teach them things and you can show them

things to open up their minds and you see it in their eyes. You see a light go on and you might not share the same language, but you see a light go on and you just see that spark of intelligence. For this individual to have the privilege, to have the father that he had. If people cannot realize that we're not talking close to fascism, we're talking fascism outright, full bore.

MICHELE MITCHELL:

I'm glad that you're doing what you're doing with this film. I'm incredibly glad because there are ways in which when I was in college, we didn't want to talk about presidents. We didn't want to talk about Wars. We wanted to do the people's history. And you know, there's a reason for that, social history. There's a reason for that. But when you think about somebody like Lincoln and Douglass, these are people who come from really modest backgrounds. And it really is phenomenal. I mean, Douglass, I believe, is the most photographed person in the 19th century. The way in which both of these men are able to become the intellects, the organic intellectuals, that they already use so sort of a Gramscian term, that they can do that. I think that's one reason why for a number of people who were Black, who had the photograph of Lincoln on their cabin walls. It's for a long time. It's the sense that if somebody that humble can reach the heights that they did, maybe I can do something too.

END TC: 01:13:41:00