

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Carrie Gibson, who studies the history of the Caribbean and is the author of two books, *Empire's Crossroads: a history of the Caribbean from Columbus to the present day*, and *El Norte: the epic and forgotten story of Hispanic North America*. And we wanted to start by talking about Mary Prince. So could you tell us who she was and how her story came to be known?

CG: I wrote about her briefly in *Empire's Crossroads* because I wanted to bring in a woman's voice. And one thing that we see with narratives of enslaved people that start to kind of emerge, especially in the 19th century, there are a few in the 18th, is you don't get as many women. Now, later on by the end of the 19th century, and certainly in the US, you start to see a bit more. But yeah, so Mary Prince was really important in that. And she was also quite interesting because to me, she connected these other parts of *Empire* because she was born in Bermuda. And Bermuda often gets kind of left out because it's not technically the Caribbean. It sits above the tropics. But in terms of how we think about the British imperial kind of system, it's absolutely part of the British Empire. And it had enslaved people working there. She's born there. And she lives there for part of her life. And then she ends up being taken to Grand Turk on the Turks and Caicos. And again, this is one of the parts of her story that I think kind of connects these different dots is that she ended up working in the salt pans of the Turks. Because that's kind of its only export. The islands there are quite small, quite dry and the salt pans are sort of their most valuable commodity. It's not a place that you can really sort of grow sugar or things like that. So, so again, like kind of the contours of her enslavement are very, very different to how people think about cotton plantations in the deep south or sugar plantations in Jamaica. So so I was kind of quite interested in her story because of that, by the time she actually give, sort of gives her story and we'll get to this to the person who kind of writes it she has lived quite a full and dramatic and traumatic life. And one of the things about the book is that so kind of shocking is is the kind of depictions of violence that she sees and that she suffers herself. And it's a very visceral description. And I can imagine, and I think it was at the time very shocking and so much so that she's not believed publicly and we can we can talk about that in a little bit. But she also, she also ends up in Antigua and Antigua is a bit more of a well known sort of colony. So that kind of connects her sort of back to the main sort of thrust of the English Caribbean story. She has this kind of quite complicated life. And again, I think this is the really important thing to remember is that, enslaved people were forced into a type of mobility because they didn't ask for they start in one place, they end to another, they're sold to this person there, given to that and we have to kind of bear that in mind. And I think her life story really illustrates that quite, quite profoundly. She ends up in Britain and she gets in contact with the anti slavery society. And through these kind of channels, ends up meeting a woman called Susanna Strickland, who's later known as Susanna Moodie. And she writes, she gets sort of Mar y to tell her her story and they publish this account in 1831. And it becomes a big deal. It becomes quite, quite successful. It's quite a talking point. Because 1831, I mean, you're at the point where Britain has long abolished the slave trade and it is on the point of abolishing slavery in its colonies. So your tiers out of the abolition of slavery. So it's quite a moment for all of this to kind of come into that. And by that point, Strickland was connected to Thomas Pringle, who is the Secretary of the

Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery. So again, these sort of anti slavery kind of connections are there. So yeah, but what comes out of it, and this is kind of fascinating. And I think in my new project, I want to kind of go into this a bit more is that a couple of libel suits come out of it. And basically, one of the takeaways from the two libel suits is that Mary's story isn't believed by at least by one of the people by the one of the claimants, he writes this incredibly mean magazine piece. His name is James McQueen. And he's partly sort of defending West Indian sort of interests. But he's also personally attacking her. He's suggesting that the stories are exaggerated, but you know, she's a kind of tool of these anti slavery activists. And so Pringle, sues McQueen, for libel. And so anyway, this all becomes kind of gets in the press. But to me, the thing that's really interesting about this is like here we are, this woman has told her story. And there's doubt is cast upon it. And that just resonates with modern times a bit when women tell their stories, and doubt continues to be cast upon them, especially if they're quite horrific. And I think about sort of yes, the power of something like metoo has brought down some powerful men, but likewise, there's absolutely plenty of disbelievers and trolling and that sort of thing directed at women who do come forward. So, so there's a lot in Mary's story to kind of unpick and talk about, because I think it has a lot of resonances to the present day.

AT: Yeah. And so I'd like to just clarify the context of how her story was published. So she was actually working for Thomas Pringle, the abolitionist that you mentioned. And then Susanna Strickland was living in his home. So that's how they connected. And it is really interesting that when we're talking about not one, but two libel suits. Yeah. So we've got Pringle suing McQueen, the magazine editor, and then John Wood, who was Prince's enslaver, also then suing Pringle. So no point is Mary an active participant. She's not the plaintiff. She's not the defendant in either of these cases, but she is called to testify. And these white men are seeing Pringle as the responsible party, not the woman whose story it is, and not the woman who wrote the book.

CG: Yeah. I mean, that too, it's like, why not go for Susanna Moodie? And I think it's partly because they were trying to go after Pringle because of his position in the anti-slavery society. But at the same time, too, it's like, was it that easy to just kind of dismiss the two women, like they were incidental? But again, I think what's interesting and what comes out of the trial testimony, too, is that some of Mary's experiences were kind of very much glossed over or left out of her account. And because she is a human and lived a complicated human life, she is then later kind of presented as, again, this was kind of used against her as being kind of unreliable. But yeah, at the end of the day, nobody's suing either of the women. Nobody's saying they committed libel. But more that the tract itself was kind of unbelievable and exaggerated, and it was a tool of the anti-slavery brigade.

AT: I think it's really a question of them not believing that either of the women was truly responsible, and in that way, not giving them agency for what they jointly produced.

CG: Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. I mean, again, we're kind of dealing with the 1830s. And I mean, I'm

not an expert in kind of the development of sort of the literary sphere in England. But obviously, and obviously, there have been women authors, but this kind of speaks to both the sidelining of sort of someone like Moodie as an author, and then clearly, the sidelining of a black, formerly enslaved woman as a subject too. So yeah, I think it kind of, it's an interesting moment, and it's a really funny one, because there's not really been that much done on this. In a way, when I think about kind of the reams of scholarship around other, I say reams, I mean, there's definitely work that's been done on this book, but I guess comparing it to later tracts. And I know when we were talking about sort of ideas before I came on the show, we were talking about Sojourner Truth, and how her speech got kind of, I don't know if translated is the right word, but you know.

AT: It was mangled. It was mangled.

CG: It was mangled. But that's much later, and there's a lot more around that. There's a lot more writings and scholarship and that sort of thing. And so I don't know if it's, with this particular narrative, it kind of sits in its own quite unique place, I think. And again, I'm looking at it as a source as a historian, and I think if you're kind of coming at it from sort of literary history, or history of like the sort of evolution of sort of slave narratives and stuff, maybe it sits in a different place, but certainly the historical source is very, it is very unique and kind of multiple levels.

AT: And for context, for anyone who wasn't privy to our conversation before this, the reason Sojourner Truth got dragged into this is that when we were discussing this topic, as this is what we should talk about, for me, it really resonated as a broader pattern of abolitionists, including white women, telling enslaved women's stories for them, for better or worse. So you've got Catharine Maria Sedgwick told a lot of Elizabeth Freeman's story. And that was, I think, quite good. They had a really good relationship, and I think there was a fair bit of mutual respect there, and they knew each other for many years. Whereas Sojourner Truth's famous speech that is known as "Ain't I a Woman?", she never said that. She grew up in, I believe, New York and would not have had the dialect of a southern, uneducated, enslaved woman.

And so many years after she actually gave that speech, so she gave the speech in 1851, but then the most popular version that came to be remembered was the 1863 version where white abolitionist Francis Dana Barker Gage really just changed all of what she said, and gave her that sort of southern slave patois. And just, I mean, quite literally, rewrote history. And we do have a contemporaneous version that Truth approved for publication. So you can actually look at these side by side and see just how badly she mangled it.

But in all of these instances, we're talking about people who had their own political agenda and whether they were doing this with consent and in collaboration, like Elizabeth Freeman's story being told versus the Sojourner Truth situation. And we don't know how much of Mary Prince's story was edited by Susanna, and we don't know necessarily what exactly Susanna's ends were. It seems pretty clear that she was an abolitionist, she was presenting this story to help persuade people to the cause of abolition. But it definitely, it removes that degree of agency that people have over telling their own story, especially because so many slaves were illiterate.

CG: Yeah, definitely. And that's kind of the problem of the sort of white interlocutor. And you see

this with sort of the telling of women's stories. And I guess I'm thinking of ones that are authored by men, like Equiano, for instance, he authored his own, like, I don't know if men had more agency or the life of Frederick Douglass, Narrative Life Frederick Douglass. If that's just sort of indicative of the gender divide or it's just more kind of coincidence because so many enslaved people were denied access to literacy that some of the narratives did come from people who were able to become literate, but others just simply didn't. But yeah, I mean, I think there's a lot of fashioning towards certain ideas in the cause of abolition. I mean, the story of Elizabeth Freeman is quite interesting as well. And it is slightly different because, it's kind of fascinating on two levels because the woman who sort of writes this account of her and publishes it in a magazine is herself a famous writer at this point, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and she's actually in a way that we don't really know that much about the woman who, Susanna Moody, who was involved, and I think she did write other things, but who was involved sort of 20 odd years earlier in Britain, Sedgwick was quite well known in her lifetime as a novelist. So she already had a platform on which to kind of talk about the Freeman case. And again, like, I think that one's just quite fascinating because I was reading around this a bit, and there's a journal article by this English professor called Sari Edelstein, and she kind of looks at the story of Elizabeth Freeman. So the short version of it is that Freeman basically sued for her freedom in 1780s Massachusetts, and wasn't the lawyer who was involved with helping her was Sedgwick's father, I think. And so that kind of brought her into the household, and then she got her freedom, and then she went to work for them as a domestic and as a paid person. So what this journal article is talking about, though, and I didn't realize this because I don't have kids, and so I'm not really reading children's books, but apparently the story of Elizabeth Freeman has been in the 21st century has been made and remade and remade, and it's now part of the kind of 21st century children's sort of heroes of history, which is really fascinating because she was one of the very early freedom suits. You know, she was a woman bringing it, it was the 1780s, and the whole issue of freedom suits is something that now I think getting a lot more attention in the US, and perhaps it has in the scholarship for a while beyond that, but I think it's registering in the public consciousness a bit more, but when you work on Spanish America, there's freedom suits from like the 16th century onwards. So like there's a very long tradition of of contesting for your freedom and kind of challenging legal systems, but what's interesting about the Elizabeth Freeman case is that it comes around the time of the American Revolution and it's these sort of cases, and it's followed, it's either followed or preceded, and I don't have my notes to hand, by other enslaved people in Massachusetts kind of making similar cases, basically there are similar cases going on at the time, yeah.

AT: When the new constitution comes out, it's read publicly, and she hears that and says something along the lines of everyone is free, and so she rucks up to Thomas Sedgwick, who's a lawyer, and is like, hey, doesn't this mean I'm free? And so they took the case to court, and one, and then later when a different case went to the Massachusetts Supreme Court, her case was used as the precedent on which the slavery is not legal in Massachusetts under the new constitution, so her case set the precedent for all slavery in Massachusetts to be overturned. When I was saying like it's a different vibe, so to speak, she then worked for Thomas Sedgwick

in his house for decades until she died, and she was actually buried in their family plot. She was the only non-family member to be buried with the family after she died. So clearly there was a deep relationship there that I think impacted how she told Elizabeth's story.

CG: Yeah, there was obviously a lot of affection, but I also think, and again, I was just trying to read some of the scholarship around it and just sort of reflect on it a bit, but again, it kind of comes with a paternalism, if I'm being slightly unfair, or I don't know if it's unfair, but Sedgwick had kind of a white saviourist idea that we can see today and kind of label it as such, but I think at the time, obviously there was kind of, I don't know how self-aware people were about this sort of thing. I think there was a sense of her family had been involved in this lawsuit. Obviously Elizabeth Freeman was very, fond enough of this family to go work for them for the rest of her life, but also I think that story kind of illuminates again these kind of, the tangled nature of these relationships and of a world that when it is divided between enslaved and free, how people form, especially in the family, how relationships work across families, across being enslaved, being free, across limited possibilities. One of the things that's really interesting to me about Freeman, it's like, why does she choose to go and stay with that family? Why does she choose to stay with them when she's the free person she could do? She could have gone somewhere else even I guess within Massachusetts or so again, and we don't really get a sense of her decision-making and I think the same, kind of the same thing with Mary Prince, it's like, because these are mediated what's being held back? What don't we know? You know, especially kind of in the case of Mary Prince because of its connection to the abolitionist movement and its needs its need to shock and to spur people into action and what's left out of what she would like to include or what she would like us to know or just how she felt about other things that maybe weren't necessarily involved are connected constantly to violence and atrocity. I think that sometimes with these narratives they have to perform and so a lot gets lost in that too. And so I mean, unfortunately the technology was not there, we do not have the tapes from the interview, so to speak. So we'll kind of never know what was left out, and that's a huge challenge for the historian. I mean, that's part of the problem with a lot of these texts, is that they raise as many questions as they answer.

AT: Yeah, and in most cases, we don't have like I said, with Sojourner Truth, we do have that published version of it was contemporaneous, she signed off on it. That is the most accurate version we're going to get. But it was still usurped by this white woman's later version that was clearly significantly altered to suit her own ends. And I think what really frustrates me about that particular situation is that she was, in my opinion, reducing Sojourner Truth. So she was taking a very eloquent woman and reducing her speech patterns to ones that she thought would be more relatable for people. She basically said, this is what a former slave sounds like. And that's really annoying, to put it mildly.

CG: But I think that this is the problem when talking about in assessing the abolitionist movements is that while abolitionists thought they were doing the morally right thing, a lot of them carry very, very racist ideas with them. So sure, okay, we shouldn't enslave people. But I also think black people speak like this like the woman who changed the text, right? And that's

one of the big complications. And in the current and contemporary discussions that we're trying to have in Britain and the US about reparations, about black history, about the about slavery, about these histories, you do have a contingent of people going, "but we ended slavery." And it's like, that doesn't mean people weren't racist at the time. That doesn't mean that people it's the words of freed people were not taken and mangled. It doesn't mean that and you have to be careful to not put today's value judgments on the past. But even looking at it then, it was clear that within abolitionist groups, even in this kind of works, not only in the US and Britain, but also I'm thinking of France. And there were a lot of graduates a lot of people who thought abolition should be gradual because the enslaved people couldn't handle freedom, or they needed it and they needed it in stages, or and then there's also the issue of compensating the enslavers. And so it wasn't like everybody went, "oh, these people are equal to us and why on earth are they enslaved" and that's ended. There are a lot of different degrees in those discussions. And I think that sometimes gets flattened by people who want to kind of believe, well, but we freed white people ended slavery. And it's like, it doesn't quite work like that. You know, and it wasn't that straightforward. I mean, there were factions and, and there was just a lot of, I mean, also this is a time of scientific racism you're dealing, so, by the 19th century, you're dealing with a couple of centuries, at least certainly post-emitment thought, of racialized categories of attributes and racialized categories. And so people are working in that context. So even these well-meaning white women are still writing in these contexts of, that they probably don't they don't even realize or understand, and that's why I think sometimes when you read these texts, they can come off as quite patronizing, or I mean, certainly, I mean, it's outrageous what happened to Sojourner Truth. I mean, absolutely outrageous. And, and I think that that's something to kind of be to, to, to keep in mind when sort of dealing with these texts. Because one of the other things that popped to mind in thinking about all of this are the women who were involved in, kind of more direct action and how they're like footnoted in the archives and have to kind of be drawn out later. And probably the best example of this is Nanny of the Maroons, who becomes like a national hero in the 1970s. You know, she's kind of brought back to sort of national consciousness, or international consciousness, because I definitely within Jamaica, she was remembered and oral history plays a big part in that as well. But she's only mentioned four times in the archives. And, and so we think about that person, so Nanny of the Maroons was a Maroon leader in Jamaica in the 18th century involved in sort of fighting British troops. And, and she was also sort of possibly an Obeah priestess, a healer all these different roles. And so we have to kind of imagine, or sort of work from how she has been spoken about, because there's not an archival trail, and you compare that to these kind of stories, like, I guess I'm thinking again of Elizabeth Freeman, the virtuous ex-slave who sort of, who works within the system versus the people who work outside the system. And I'm working at, my next book is about abolition of kind of both inside and outside the system. But that contrast is really sharp to me, because those women come to kind of public consciousness later, and it's partly because their story doesn't, what's a white woman going to do with a Maroon leader? You know, they're not even going to have access to Maroon territories and stuff. So it's just like the women who are involved in those sort of things. I think those stories are taken longer to emerge, maybe, in sort of popular knowledge.

AT: So I think what you're getting at here is respectability politics, and the fact that someone who is an abolitionist, or a suffragist, or someone who is fighting for a cause has a vested interest in promoting respectability politics, because they're trying to persuade the people with the power to make change, which is usually white men. Regardless of the scenario we're talking about, it's usually white men. But they're trying to persuade the white men that we deserve to be given the vote. It's okay, you can trust us with this because we'll behave. And similarly, abolitionists have that incentive to present the "noble" slave with that paternalistic attitude that you were talking about saying, "oh, it's okay, they're not going to actually threaten your way of life if you let us do this." Whereas someone like Manny of the Maroons is so far from being respectable in that context, that it's safer for them to ignore that she exists, because they don't want the white men remembering that this is what a formerly enslaved woman is acting like without you giving her any additional rights.

CG: Right. And no, that's absolutely true. And I think, you know, as we get into Victorian society, that whole absolute performance of respectability, and it kind of comes up in both of the texts that we're talking about, because some of the stuff that comes up in the Mary Prince trial kind of indicates that she had sort of unmarried sexual relationships with, so I think there was like a captain. Obviously too, enslaved women were kind of forced into rapes, very complicated domestic arrangements, types of concubinage. There was all kinds of stuff going on that there was no vocabulary for in a white, performative society of sort of this kind of morality, because Sedgwick does it as well and kind of glosses over the fact that Elizabeth Freeman has a daughter, but no husband. She kind of that's kind of in passing. And this other person, and I think it's also called like Betsy, I think she had the same name, maybe Sedgwick actually initially refers to her as a sister, and it turns out it was a daughter, and there's a little bit of confusion around that. And again, that makes sense, like, oh, let's just elide this thing that doesn't fit into this kind of neatness. But yeah, and during moments of great upheaval, so I'm thinking of the Haitian revolution, I mean, the abolitionists are kind of looking at it and going, okay, how can we make our case when this is happening? You know, how do we make a case for abolition and avoid this, what just happened in Saint-Domingue when half a million slaves rose up, and then you end up in 1804 with the independent state of Haiti. And so that was always kind of part, again, part of the equation, and this is where you get this sort of gradualism and people like that kind of saying, oh, no, no, we've got to do it in stages, we've got to we've got to have apprenticeships and we've got to have, you know, these sort of things. And then is what's so fascinating about the current project I'm working on is that the lengths that people will went to to secure their own freedom, you know, and these uprisings. And the archive is so full of these stories. And some of them are small, some of them fizzle out, some of them don't really go anywhere. But then you kind of catch glimpses of things. So one of the things I'm putting in my book is the as Bussa's rebellion in 1816 in Barbados. And that takes place over sort of Easter weekend and a bunch of cane fields go up in flames. And it's a big deal because it takes a while for it to be put out. But also Barbados hadn't had a big uprising since the late 17th century. So it was in and what triggers it is the Slave Registry Bill of 1815, which the news of this, which is where the plantations have to sort of like, basically, there has to be a slave registry. So that's kind of monitor or to kind of police that there's no illicit trading going on. And this, this news gets

kind of interpreted as being emancipation, because a lot of the bill, like a lot of the debate in Parliament is like, this is going to lead to emancipation. So obviously when the news gets the Caribbean. But one of the people involved in Bussa's rebellion was this woman called Nanny Grigg. And all we know about her is what somebody said during the trial at the end of, when everybody had been arrested when the when the rebellion was over. And she basically had, she was able to read and she had stolen the newspapers about this stuff. And she was telling people that they were going to be freed on New Year's Day. And she kind of, and it comes up in the testimony that she was kind of telling people, well, if you know, because New Year's day comes and goes, and she's like, well, I guess we're just going to have to fight for freedom, we have to go take it. And that's all we know about that. Like that's it. You know, and it's like, wait, wait, what?

AT: I feel like that deserves a little more discussion!

CG: And this is the frustrating thing is that the longer you kind of dig in the archives, the more these sort of people, usually women are kind of scattered, but the people who get the credit tend to be Bussa or the organizers. And it's like quite often women were involved. And sometimes you'll see things like a conspiracy that put down or a small rebellion. And it will be like sort of 20 men were arrested and three women. And they don't, I mean, they don't even bother to put the names of people in the colonial records either. And this is kind of, I find like, I mean, that's definitely the case in the English-speaking ones. And the Spanish ones as well, it'll just kind of say that, often it's just a number of people. Sometimes it is a list of names, usually only first names, you know, it's really, really difficult in the records. And then you get a glimpse of something like this, and you just think, well, I mean, come on, there's got to be more. And there is more, we just don't, we just don't know it. And I should say as well, one of the other things that you see, and I think this is important too, because in talking about agency, as you do often get reports of men and women who have either sold out a conspiracy or sold out other people and said maybe there was, maybe somebody was plotting something, but maybe they weren't and so people could kind of manipulate white fear by saying, yeah, yeah, so-and-so's plotting something. And then they would get their freedom. Often that was the reward was to be manumitted if they ratted out a plot. And again, I kind of see that kind of what certainly in British Caribbean, certainly in the Spanish Caribbean, loyalty, such as it is, is rewarded. And that really complicates this kind of story, right? Because we kind of think, well wasn't the struggle unified? And also we have to remember sometimes people just went for their own, went for their own freedom. You know, that was the important thing is getting their freedom. And that is important and legitimate too. But it complicates things. And the archive's just kind of full of fragments, quite frustratingly, because and so I feel like in some ways working on this book that I'm doing, it is full of fragments because some things just come up but dead end like, that's it. This is all we know. We can kind of guess the context or the life of this person or what was happening on this island or that place. But ultimately, we don't know any more about Nanny Grigg, really.

I'm also just reminded of, do you know who J. Marion Sims was? (negative noise) So American



“father of gynecology.” And I mean sarcastic quote marks around that because he performed just horrific experimental surgeries on nine different enslaved women. And we only know the names of three of them. And we have no record from them. The only record that we have are essentially his his experimentation records where he talks about operating on them without anesthesia, they were forced to assist him on each other's surgeries. You know, it was just absolutely horrific, but he was the one who was lauded. And like, there's actually like statues of him and stuff. And meanwhile, the women that he tortured are largely forgotten. Like, we don't even know two thirds of their names.

CG: Yeah. Yeah. And I do know this story. I didn't realize that was the doctor's name. But yeah, yeah, yeah. And sadly, I mean, this is what we see all the time. Like people aren't even given the dignity of having their names put to the record. I've been working in this field for, you know, nearly 20 years. And it's still, it still shocks. It still shocks. It's still, “really, you rounded up these people, or you found this thing out, or you did this thing, and you couldn't be bothered to actually just note what people's names are?” And I think that says a lot about this whole period. I mean, it says a lot about the stripping of personhood that, the very particular form of slavery that came to the Americas and that took root in the entire hemisphere embodied. And that was certainly one of those things. Because in this book that I'm working on, it is hemispheric. I want to move beyond sort of the English speaking story and sort of bring in places that I think in the English language often get overlooked, like Brazil, where it's obviously a very, very important part of their history as well. And, but one of the things that does feel quite universal going through things, reading things, is this lack of naming, this absolutely treating people like chattel absolutely stripping them of even the dignity of a name. You know, and even with some of the leaders of revolts and things like that the spellings of names like Quao or Kujo or stuff often change. I mean, sometimes that's just sort of 18th and 19th century things like spelling isn't as standardized. But it seems at times that there's confusion about what the person's even called, you know. And, and again, that kind of speaks to the system.

AT: I'd like to go back to what you were saying about denial, because you were saying that it's almost unbelievable that this “doctor” is doing these things to humans. And I wonder how much of the denial is, I mean, obviously some of it is political, you don't want public awareness that slavery is horrific because you're pro-slavery for whatever reasons that you have. But I also wonder how much of it is also comfort denial. So similar to say climate change deniers, who don't want to acknowledge that we have this huge problem because it's scary and it feels out of our control. And it's easier to just bury your head in the sand. And I think that is part of the whole meetoo situation of believe women, why won't you believe women? Right. Because we don't want to acknowledge like, I do, I very much want to acknowledge these horrific things happened. Because they did. And the least we can do is acknowledge that things like the Holocaust, the fact that we have Holocaust deniers is insane. The fact that there's a Harvard law professor who denies that comfort women during World War II, were sex slaves. He claims that they were voluntary sex workers. I know - she, sorry, I know no one can see this, but she is giving me exactly the face that you are picturing in your head in response to that fact. But this and he published this, like he published this recently, like in recent years.

CG: Wow.

AT: So the fact that people are so willing to deny others' experiences because it makes you uncomfortable.

CG: Oh, I mean, that's, that's absolutely the moment we're in really in having these conversations, I think. Especially, I'm going to say, especially English-speaking world, because I think that we are ahead in the conversations compared. I mean, I've just had some sort of shocking experiences in Spain, where like some of this stuff isn't even on the radar. Like "what slaves?" Like it's like, I don't know if you've been to like Cuba, but you know, Spain has some stuff to answer for here. And there's just, there's just not the level of public kind of discussion. And what's really interesting in Britain is that the government wants to shut it down. Like, right again, not to say, okay, we're not going to, we're not going to pretend this didn't happen. But you know what reparations, not on the table, there was in the past, we don't want to deal with this. But the institutions here, are some of the institutions are digging and trying to find those connections and saying, yeah, actually, you know what, yeah, we I mean, like Cambridge did this, they did a big study of all the colleges and like what colleges got money from what kind of West Indian money, and that sort of thing. And so some of the institutions are taking it on their own back to do, to do this work. But, but it means that the conversation is coming out very piecemeal, right? Because, because it's not being led by say, the government. It's interesting in Holland, where the king has apologized for his links to slavery. And I think there has been a, I think the prime minister has, but there's been no kind of further discussion, at least to my knowledge of like setting up systems of reparation. And, and so all of this is kind of going on in the background, right, of this kind of ongoing denial, because for whatever reason, I think, at least the impression I'm given is that people, and maybe because reparations are part of the discussion, I don't know white people feel like they're going to be implicated, or they're going to, I don't know, because like, there is a fear around it. Or people just dismissed it and say, well, that was in the past we don't need to talk about that, slavery's over. And it's, and like you say, with kind of climate change, it's like, look we're not going to move past some of the issues of the present until we go back to that. And it is in the past. And you're going to have to accept that things happened. And even if you're a family that personally implicated in them, and like, yeah, I'm really struggling with understanding the resistance of people to that.

AT: Well, I think you actually sort of touched on it just there, because people don't want to think that they are the bad guys, and they don't want to think that they are responsible. So things like climate change - well, if climate change is manmade, then I might have to take responsibility and change my own behaviors in whatever way that means for you personally. And we don't like to think that we are the bad guys. And I think the empathy gap is also coming into play here, because we, humans are more prone to empathize with people who share their lived experiences. So if you're a cis het white man, that's who you empathize with. And it is more difficult. It is not impossible by any means, but it is more difficult for you to empathize with the experiences of other people. So a lot of white men of the time, hearing that Mary Prince was

physically abused by one of her enslavers, Robert Darrell. In their minds, they're thinking, "well, white men aren't like that. White men can be trusted to treat their slaves well." And I mean, there was there was some Fox News commentator who said that even a couple years ago that enslaved people were treated well. The fact that we've still got that level of denial going on. And I think that was in response to Michelle Obama daring to acknowledge that she's raising two little black girls in a house built by slaves, meaning the White House.

CG: Right. Right.

AT: And so that empathy gap means that a lot of the white men who were reading this story, even if they were even bothering to read it, let's be honest, rather than just dismissing it out of hand, even say a lower, working-class, white man, may still be prone to sympathize with the rich white man, because that's aspirational. There is that belief that I could become him one day. But if he's this horrible abuser, then how does that impact my aspirations? And people like me can't be the villain of the story.

CG: Yeah, that's getting closer to the number of it. It's like, yeah, but we're this is the United States. We all have freedom now. And the problem is solved. And you know, and it's not and it's not white people stopping everyone else from being free. And it's like, I don't know if you've read many books about this, but...

AT: Oh, they haven't. I guarantee they haven't.

CG: But this whole thing in Florida and the "but slaves picked up some skills." And it's like, sorry, what? You know, like, the whole thing is quite, it's quite crazy. And also it's worrying that it's being lumped into the culture wars, whatever those are. Because, and this is one of the arguments in my book is that we really, until we come to some kind of consensus and on this past and how to get through it there's there are going to be these divides. It is going to be, and like you say, the empathy gap is a big part of that.

And also the kind of narratives that were peddled after the Civil War in the US were very unhelpful. The racism here that you got in the Windrush years has been incredibly unhelpful. You know, there have been so many barricades to having a clearer-eyed understanding of this of this period. And so even as recent as 2007, when there was the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slave trade, it was very triumphant here. It was very, you know, I think, I think it was jokingly called Wilberfest like, it was like, oh, you know, Wilberforce, we ended it. And it's like, right, I mean, yes, technically, the Great British public signed petitions and the laws were changed. But like, why? Because the system was untenable. Well, why was the system untenable? Because of Nanny Grigg, because of Nanny of the Maroons, because of Elizabeth Freeman. Over time, it was obvious that the system could not hold. And again, it kind of diminishes the sort of white do-goodness of, but we ended it. We changed the laws and we had the Civil War. And it's like, but it wasn't a top down movement. It was in reaction to this kind of relentless pressure of, of all the various, very different sort of types of fight, the fights from many fronts, legal, rebellion, even domestic, resistance domestically, sabotaging things and stuff like

that. It was all in pieces. And when you put that together, and that's what I'm trying to do in this book, is you get an enormous panorama of resistance. And it's like, well, yeah, I mean, eventually the law and reality have to catch up with that. But we're just not the point of understanding that in the conversation yet. And I say, we, I mean, white people. I think Black scholars have been talking about this for a long time. I think there's amazing Black scholarship that I hope my book points people to and that I have to draw from and engage with very critically in a good way critically, to kind of think about, you know, what I'm working on. But yeah, I mean we are at a moment where there is an enormous empathy gap. And this kind of desire to be seen as doing good and have done good, and rather than going, oh, actually, it wasn't quite what you think it was. I mean, and that's why even even these complicated stories, we can see this from 100 years ago. God, no, 200 years ago, with Mary Prince, with Elizabeth Freeman with the, the retellings of these stories. A lot of those problems haven't, haven't been resolved yet. You know, we're still kind of grappling with them. And like you say it requires change. And what does that change look like? And I think sometimes the change gets flattened into oh, they want reparation payments. And it's not like that. Like, that's not what the reparations debate is about. And that's not the vision of certainly not from like the Kumarakom countries. But it gets flattened into this thing, because because there's still questions over what the actionable steps are. Because like you said, climate change is a good parallel in the sense that like, okay, we've got it, we've got to do something. And it's like, well, what does that mean? You know, and what, what level of discomfort, do I have to go into to engage with this as well? You know, it's like kind of a lack of tolerance for personal discomfort too.

AT: So I am curious because I feel like there is a bit of an elephant in the room in that we are two white women talking about white women telling the stories of Black women. And I'm curious, are there any tools that you use to try to ensure that you aren't putting a white lens, for example, on the stories that you're telling?

CG: I mean, that's a great question. And that's something I've been struggling with this entire time with this book. And I think in some ways, I've had to flip it around and just go, okay, this is, some ways has to be through a white lens, because that, that's who I am as a writer. But here are the questions that I have. And I hope those when trying to kind of establish this panorama, what are the questions I'm trying to ask? It's like, for me, so one of the things at the heart of my book, and I think this is a universal question. And one way through this is to try to find like the universal questions.

And again, that can be quite complicated. But I think one of them is, what is freedom? Because I'm not very happy with the discourse around freedom. And so a lot of it doesn't make sense to me. I read the canon and I'm like, yeah, no, this isn't working for me. Or I read things that are more modern, but they don't actually discuss our past in the Americas with the slave society. And so how do I make sense of freedom? And one of the reasons I want to write this book is like, well, why don't I look at how it was fought for by the people who had least a bit, right? And, and to me, trying to make sense of like, how do we find a definition of freedom? How do we understand it in a way that can apply to everyone? I think I hope is like a useful lens rather than me trying to mitigate or retell certain stories in a way that that that suits me. Again, I don't

have a cause in the same way, like an abolitionist would. But no, it's something I've grappled with this entire book is like am I doing these stories justice? To what ends am I using them? You know, what is the question I'm trying to answer here? Because I just think the way we think about freedom and the discourse we have on it just comes up so short that I, you know, I was like, okay, let's just go back to the beginning. And of course, you go back to the beginning and and Black scholarship has been saying this for 30 years with Orlando Patterson, like freedom is a product of slavery. And it's like, can we just start here and start again with our conversation? And that's so I guess it's trying to kind of aim for universal and being mindful of how I kind of, I kind of get there. But yeah, I mean and I'm very front and center in this book about, okay, here's, this is who I am, this is why I'm doing this. I want to handle these stories and give them the context in place that they deserve without sort of putting my own agenda into it. And I think that one of the things that you do see as you go sort of through the archive and read the secondary literature and stuff is is that these visions of freedom, these ideas of freedom that enslaved people had from the 15th century onwards, it offers a lot of variety, it offers a different vision of the world. I mean, I think the Maroons are really fascinating for this. And, and that's kind of what I want to put out there. But yeah, like, as a white person, like, you know, and it's because, you know what, like the white canon isn't, isn't answering it for me. You know, it's like, I have to look where, where I've been sort of seeking other things, but yeah, absolutely. And I think this is something that historians in general, working in fields where they realize their whiteness is, is this particular category that often gives them privilege and perspective and stuff. I think that's definitely being, is checked the right word? I think people have become much more aware of it now than, are very attuned to it in ways that maybe even 10 years ago, it was less so. But you still get that occasionally I'll still see Twitter when somebody somebody will be like, Oh, right. So I went to a conference on whatever. And it was like all white panelists or all male panelists are all and it is it's there, there are still institutions. I mean, I'm not in an institution. And part of the reason I'm not is like, I just, there's a lot about kind of the way these things unfold in institutions that doesn't make me entirely comfortable either. So yeah, but no, it's, it's an important question to kind of be sitting here as a white person talking about this history. But also, I think they are connected history is like, we have to we have to deal with this. We have to talk about this too, as white people, and we can't just walk in and go, well, we saved everyone and we abolished everything. So I don't know what the problem is like, yeah, no, it doesn't work like that. Sorry. And so in that sense, I feel like I'm trying to make a contribution to this conversation. And one of my big things is, I think that the way history has been taught makes us think that it's this thing that has to be memorized and dates and like kings and queens and battles. And it's like, no, no, no, history is about having a conversation about the past. And I think if we, if we bring it to that, because I think this is also why people tend to kind of shut out history. They don't know a lot about it because it scares them because it's like, Oh, I'm going to fail that test. And it's like, it's not about failing a test. It's about engaging with the past in ways that make you think more rigorously about it, in ways that make you want to learn more about it. It's about doing this kind of thing. It's about having a conversation like, okay, we know these things happen. We know where we are in the present. How do we connect them? How do we make this, how do we bring our stream of consciousness from the present? I don't know. But yeah, that's that's kind of where I, where I am with that.

AT: I think it's also a question of not further siloing marginalized histories. So not trying to make it a "only Black people are allowed to talk about Black history" because we don't want, that we want all histories to be considered mainstream. And we don't want it isolated to just Black history month. We don't want all of the responsibility for all of the scholarship for all of the African diaspora and African history, we don't want all that falling on only people who are of that ethnic descent. So I think it is important to say that we do want people of all backgrounds working in this space. We just want them to do it thinking critically and considering their own potential biases. And I mean, for me, and I think I sort of alluded to this earlier, if I'm uncomfortable, I lean into it. So if I come across something that instinctively I want to shy away from, that's usually a good indicator that I need to lean into the discomfort.

CG: No, and I think that's a good benchmark because there are things that you kind of go, oh, I don't want to read that, or I don't want to deal with that. It's like, okay, that's probably why I should.

AT: Because that's also how we close the empathy gap is by reading other people's stories and accepting them.

CG: I think that's the key. It's accepting them, right? It's going, oh, actually, this seems so horrific and so unbelievable. But until I'm told otherwise, until somebody proves otherwise, I'm going to believe this and that's the problem with a lot of colonial history is the narratives that people want to believe versus the realities. And again, it's like, look, there's libraries full of the stuff. Britain's in a moment where it's really in a mess and in decline to people want to kind of imagine the time, you know, and there's still people within living memory here, absolutely, who were born in the colonies. I mean, some of them will be quite old now, or it was post-independence, but in places where there were still like British companies, or there was still that. And you get this, the really crazy place where this happens is Portugal. You get a lot of that in Portugal, because their decolonization was so much later in the '70s, like, there's people my age who were like, oh, yeah, I was born white, you're like, oh, I was born in Mozambique, I was born in Angola, and then my parents went back to Portugal. And you just kind of think, colonialism is not behind us. I'm like, it is not behind us. And in the story of slavery and abolition is central to the story of colonialism in the Americas. You know, I can't really speak for like the Ottoman Empire or China or anything like that. But from the world I grew up in and the world that I deal with, so the triangulation between the West Coast of Africa, Europe and the Americas, I mean, this is unresolved. And this is to me the heart of European colonialism. So, yeah, yeah. Again, those people who are very, very scared of leaning into their discomfort.

AT: And I think that it's also a matter of just like if you or I are telling someone's story, and I mean, really anyone's story, because let's be honest, I can't actually necessarily relate that much to a white woman from the 1800s from a lived experience standpoint. But just as you or I or hopefully any other historian is critically thinking about our own biases, there is so much lack of critical thinking when we're considering the biases of the people who produced the

documents that we're seeing in the first place. So, looking at Francis Dana Barker Gage's biases when she mangled Sojourner Truth's speech. And the idea that we're just taking things at face value without considering why a white colonial official might have written an account that way. I just don't understand people who will not accept a woman, an enslaved woman's story of how she was treated, but are so willing to accept a white man's account. Like they don't even see the empathy gap that's at play there.

CG: Right, right. And I think, well, I think too, certainly thinking about Victorian periods, just the, I mean, but we still have, I mean, male dominance is not gone. And so it's like, who are you going to believe - your tribe, right? Like, oh, me and the other white men. But yeah, but I feel like that's still with us, you know? I mean, and it partly is because we haven't resolved some of these things that, obviously, some gender issues don't spring from slavery. But what the slavery era pulls into very sharp focus is the status of women in general, but then certainly the status of enslaved women, but also free women of color, like their stories are really interesting, especially depending on certain places who like, I'm thinking of like Saint-Domingue before the Haitian Revolution, there were all these like some jury laws where sort of women who were free and wealthy couldn't wear this, couldn't wear that, couldn't sort of be in their finery. And those got stricter and stricter and stricter over time. And it's like, what does that tell us? It tells us that the white community is very threatened by rich, powerful, beautiful, well-dressed women, who often either some of them were mistresses and concubine, some of them ran businesses, some of them I mean, they were free. So, but their freedom kept being circumscribed. And again that just tells us a lot about not only the slavery era, but the place of women in all of this. And and that's so important to the story of slavery and of abolition is the place of women. And just the way that names are left off or that the things that we don't know, it's really frustrating. Although to be fair, there's certainly a new generation of scholarship that's coming out where people are going on those deep digs and they are taking a name and running with it and trying to recreate a world and trying to kind of give life to just the barest hint of fact that we have about so-and-so, you know. And then, of course, historical novelists really can do this too and try to bring those stories and put them somewhere in the public consciousness because, I mean, this is the other thing, like, in writing my book and kind of mapping out who I want to work on it's amazing how like certain women are just the go-to, right? Like, Sojourner Truth, like, they're just the go-to and it's like, there were other women more digging to find them, you know.

AT: I mean, Harriet Tubman was not the only enslaved woman who escaped and worked with the Underground Railroad. She's just the most famous and no shade. Let's celebrate Harriet Tubman.

CG: For sure.

AT: But acknowledge that she wasn't the exception.

CG: Right, right. And that's a big problem. So that's one of the big problems when you talk about, like sort of the white perspective working on Black history is that history of

exceptionalism. You know, like, oh, this person is the shining example. And what, what I hope to do, what I'm trying to do in my book is intersperse kind of stories from the archive or fragments or bits with of course, I mean, of course we have to talk about Frederick Douglass, and he was exceptional in so many ways, but, but he wasn't the only person. He didn't single-handedly do everything. And I think it's important to kind of bring in the people who who are just kind of unnamed in the archive, like whose head ended up on a pike after failed rebellion. I mean, their story is important too because it's all kind of part of, of the bigger process of trying to find freedom, make sense of freedom. And I think as women, that's still, to me, a very live and active question, like, what is freedom? And will it be taken away from me? And what would that even look like? And so I think within this and thinking about, again, the experiences of the people who had the very least amount of freedom, and that would be Black women, because their mobility was more sort of limited they were perhaps, depending on their role, they had children. So again, that limited them because you get with a lot of Maroon colonies and runaways and stuff, you get men, because they have more access to it not always. And obviously you do absolutely get women eventually. But, and it also varies across sort of time and space. But, but just thinking about what sort of enslaved women had to endure, and connecting that to just the struggle more broadly and this is where the connection between the suffragists and the abolitionists is interesting too and even today, when we talk about white feminism versus kind of a more universal feminism, I mean, there's a very big discussion about that in general. So, so again, we haven't sort of, we haven't squared any circles yet. We're still still trying to figure it all out, really.

AT: Well, and I think, so there's two lines of thought that I've got coming out of what you've just said. And one of them is idealizing people like suffragists that we want to be perfect because they are a hero. And they are, like Susan B. Anthony was a hero. She was also a flaming racist, who actively used racist rhetoric to push her cause. So, as we're talking about the white abolitionists, and their focus is on how can I push the cause? I'm going to push the cause by putting a human face on this, but a human face that is going to appeal to my readers and hopefully persuade them. And so, when they were trying to convince white southerners to give women the vote, they leaned heavily on the fact that, well, black men have the vote and you don't want them running things. You should really entrust the white women because we are not fill in racist insult that I'm not going to repeat here. So, we need to acknowledge the whole person. And then the other thing that sprung to mind when you were talking was the intersection of exceptionalism and respectability. Because the idea of the exceptional person is not just that it ignores that, well, any person can succeed if you give them the right supports. It pretends that, well, no, this person is an outlier. But it also elevates the people who are adhering to our respectability standards. And in particular, I thought of Rosa Parks. Now, every American know, Rosa Parks, civil rights symbol. But apart from the fact that her story is told as though she was just tired from a long day of work and just couldn't take it anymore. But she'd been a civil rights activist for years. She knew what she was doing. It was strategic. And presenting her in the way that we do takes away that agency and that strategy that went into it. But part of that strategy was also she was not the first one. She was the one that was chosen to be the symbol because her predecessors, well, one of them was Claudette Colvin. But Claudette Colvin was a teenager.



She acted like a teenager with all of the, shall we say, impetuous speaking, that comes with being a teenager. And she was also unwed and pregnant. And so even though she was one of the, I believe she was the first person to really say no, I'm not submitting to letting this white person take my seat and you can arrest me and I'm going to fight it. She was part of the court case that was then taken. But she wasn't the lead plaintiff because again, Aurelia Browder was a more palatable lead plaintiff or their case. And Rosa Parks even spoke to this later saying that it's like, "if we had put her forward as the face of this, it would have been over before it even started." And she's not, she's not wrong from an understanding of human nature standpoint. She's not wrong. From a strategic standpoint, she's not wrong. But it still sucks.

CG: Yeah. And I'm just thinking too, but to back to Elizabeth Freeman again, she's modeled as this kind of virtuous sort of working within the system. And I don't know if Catharine Sedgwick was making necessarily the abolitionist case. I guess it was printed in 1850. So yeah, she must have been as well. But it's not quite as dramatic as the Mary Prince story. But again, just thinking of, yeah, someone who's this acceptable face of the struggle, right? I think both of your points are really, are really good. And really important ones for historians to think about because when we do lean on great people what is it that we're obscuring? Yeah. And usually somebody doing a thing. So Rosa Parks on the bus usually has, in fact, always has a backstory that's far more complicated than the simplicity. But just in reading around Elizabeth Freeman, and I think this happens to Rosa Parks, as well is those stories get extracted, they get simplified, they get turned into exemplary tales. And then also, hey, everybody, it's all done. It's sorted. We have civil rights now. We have abolition. And it's like, yeah, no, it doesn't work like that. Sorry. And I think that's also been a big problem is that the way a lot of these stories have been presented, you know, because people want to give them a story arc. So it's like, okay, there was a problem, a struggle a key moment, and now it's been resolved. And it hasn't been resolved. It certainly hasn't been resolved to a satisfactory end for a lot of African American people who, you know, there is very much the discussion around this. And you look at things like the 1619 project and stuff, like very clearly, these are moments in a larger story. These are not endpoints. But when we focus on exceptionalism, and I think exceptionalism, yeah, it can really be tied to respectability, as you say, but it also, it can also be racist. It can be like, oh, this person is, credit to their race type thing, which is horrendous, but that stuff still happens. And I was thinking too about, I mean, this is why I want to put in stuff about kind of people who do shop for conspiracy and be like, hey, I want my freedom. I don't care about the other people, because that's a human impulse. That's humans do that like it happens. And I was thinking about when I was reading something about MLK, and I guess it's more better known now that he had mistresses or whatever. And it's like, why shouldn't he? Okay, I mean, he was a preacher, doesn't really come in the job description. But like, just because he was a civil rights leader doesn't mean he wasn't a human, right? You know, like these people, it's like when we create heroes, and this kind of goes beyond race, like when we create heroes, we have to, they have to have these like interior lives that are perfect. And it's like, that is not how it works. 100% no. So, and it's funny how mythologizing works, because, and times change too, because I guess I think about Churchill, God, does anyone get it's mythologized as Churchill? And you know, and it's like, Oh, and he drank champagne for breakfast in brandy for lunch. And it's like, I'm actually,

that's just called alcoholism. Like if we just reframe that and was like, Oh, Churchill wasn't alcoholic. Like, would that take the gloss off? Would I get loads of angry emails? You know, but somehow it's part of his heroic myth that he could get up and drink copiously and still make massive decisions. And I look at that at the 21st century lens and go, Oh, wait, we had a really drunk leader doing all these things during like the moment that the war was, you know, but it's never presented as that. And because because a hero can have no flaws, and but it's like, wait a minute, last time I checked, the whole point of like classical drama was like the hero always has a fatal flaw but somehow we come up with these historical actors who aren't flawed or who don't, we shoehorn into a vision. I mean, the thing about the Ain't I a woman that's so problematic is that the white woman's vision is just so racist, you know, linguistically, it's just like, wow, that's your vision of what this sort of African-American leadership and leader looks like. So yeah, we have to, we have to check those impulses as we think about these people. And critical biographies often get pushed back, you know, like don't mess with my hero. And it's like, I'm far more interested in the dirt, like, please tell me about all the things we didn't know, but but a lot of people want their beliefs confirmed or their their trust in a certain individual. And I think someone like Frederick Douglass probably holds that space a bit, just thinking in terms of like the struggle for freedom in the Americas, you know, he's quite an exalted place, but you know, he was a man, like he was a normal person too, you know, on top of being an amazing orator and that sort of thing. And I think it's just, we've got to be very careful not to turn people into caricatures, but especially racialized ones, especially ones that also intersect with ideas of like race. I think that could be really, really problematic. And in the Haitian revolution, it's really interesting because like everybody's flawed and it's just fascinating. But they're also massively heroes, like Toussaint Louverture, who had his nephew killed and Jean-Jacques Dessalines was just fierce. And so he's both a hero, but everybody knows like he was pretty fierce. And just all the kind of politicking and backstabbing during the Haitian revolution. Again, like that often is presented as this like theological march to freedom. And it's like, those are more complicated than that it's far more divisive and driven internally. So yeah, we have to just be very aware of how easy it is to flatten out complicated things, especially in the service of trying to get people to the abolitionist cause or get people sort of like you say, it's always about thinking about the sources and what they call reading against the grain of them.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well behaved women rarely make history.