

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen:

Hello, I'm Karen Long, and you're listening to The Asterisk, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission. Today we're figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge around reconstruction with professor Eric Foner, the author most recently of *The Second Founding, How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution*. Professor Foner, the author of two dozen books, won the Anisfield-Wolf prize for lifetime achievement in 2020. Welcome professor.

Eric:

Nice to talk to you.

Karen:

We're speaking today on January 7th. And I thought we should begin reflecting a bit on what happened at the nation's Capitol when insurrectionists entered. As I understand it, the Confederate flag did not broach the Capitol throughout the Civil War, but it did so yesterday. So I'm thinking your reflections on that would be valuable for our listeners to hear.

Eric:

I can't think of another time when the Confederate flag was prominently displayed in the Capitol building, maybe there was one, I can't think of one in our history. When somebody told me that they had just seen the Confederate flag on TV being carried around the Capitol, my first reaction was *good*. These people are telling us exactly what they believe. You cannot beat around the bush. You cannot claim to be a Patriot and could display the Confederate flag. You cannot claim to believe in racial equality and display the Confederate flag. Of course, I find it shocking. The Confederate flag is a symbol of slavery and white supremacy. If you don't believe me, just read the so-called cornerstones' speech of Alexander Stevens, the vice president of the Confederacy, who by the way, was from Georgia, which has been in the news a lot lately.

Eric:

And Stephen said the purpose, the Confederacy embodies the principle of white supremacy, that the whites are superior to blacks and that the normal or natural status of African-Americans is as a slave. That was what the Confederacy stood for according to its vice-president. Now, of course, the president Trump has identified himself in a weird sort of way with the Confederacy. He has condemned efforts to remove Confederate monuments from various places. He vetoed the military Appropriation Act, which passed over his veto, partly because it included a provision for changing the names of military bases named after Confederate generals. He has glorified white supremacist organizations, such as the people who marched in Charlottesville a couple of years ago. And we remember his reaction to that. That they're all good people. So I'm not surprised that these demonstrators act on and inspired by Trump displayed the Confederate flag, but you know, that is part of the history of the United States. I'm sorry to

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say the shadow of slavery still exists in our society. And in a way, inadvertently the rioters were demonstrating that.

Karen:

And as you so often say: the unfinished work of the reconstruction. You've spent your life among historians, you've led three professional historic associations. Your father and uncle were important historians. Did you think about them yesterday, as you were watching this?

Eric:

I did. I often think about my father, particularly. He would think he would have been pretty shocked to see this. On the other hand, maybe not 100%. I think yesterday is a historic day, but [inaudible 00:04:26] you might say contradictory reasons, both of which are deeply embedded in the American experience. One is the election from Georgia of an African-American man and a Jewish man as senators at that state. That's an astonishing thing. If you know anything about the history of Georgia and the racism there and anti-Semitism deeply ingrained in the place. So it shows you that things can change. It's a sign of great optimism that that a state like that with such a long history can actually maybe overcome it. On the other hand... And my father was an optimist, definitely an optimist, despite much evidence to the contrary, he believed in the fundamental goodness of people. So I think he would have been very gratified by that.

Eric:

On the other hand, the insurrection or riot or mob, whatever you want to call it in the Capitol was shocking, but it was also rooted in some ways in the American experience. The effort to overturn an election, the effort to claim that somebody had won who didn't. We have many examples of that in American history. And now if you go back to the reconstruction period that I have studied a great deal after the civil war, there are plenty of violent, upper obvious things against what was then interracial political democracy. The Colfax massacre of 1873 in Louisiana, where an armed white unit basically murdered dozens of black people and to take over the government of that grant parish in Louisiana, or jump ahead to 1898, the Wilmington riot in North Carolina, where an armed mob of whites basically had a *coup d'etat* and evicted the elected biracial government of Wilmington. And they were substituted a white segregationist squat.

Eric:

So we have seen this kind of thing before. Not quite at the national level like that. And certainly not with the president egging on the rioters, but certainly governors in the South have act on lynchers and rioters and others throughout American history. So my feeling is you saw the collision of two parts of the American experience. Both are really deeply embedded in our history. One is the aspiration for greater democracy and greater equality. And the other is a kind of a white nationalism that refuses to consider everybody in the country as equally American. So rarely do they come into conflict or juxtaposition as dramatically as yesterday.

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Karen:

That's so interesting. It's so visible when you think of Stacey Abrams. And as I think of her as the person I would put a statue up as the next as a great Patriot.

Eric:

Absolutely. The election results in Georgia are attributed to Abrams and to the many people who worked with her to register large numbers of new voters, to get them out to the polls, to imbue them with a sense that they actually can make a difference. It's not surprising if you look at the history of that state and others, that many people, especially perhaps African-Americans may feel their voice is just not going to be heard. So why vote anyway? And in fact as I say, yesterday was a microcosm of so much in our history and in the state's history. Why is there a runoff in Georgia anyway? There's only two States I think that have that system. The reason is very clear. It was adopted in 1963 at the height of the civil rights movement to make sure that the candidate preferred by black voters didn't win because whites were divided among other candidates. And so you need a 50%, not just a plurality is in almost every other state to win these elections. But that was clearly a way to limit the electoral power of African-Americans. And we saw it. Luckily they overcame it this time.

Eric:

One other point, why was the Congress meeting anyway? It was meeting in order to count the electoral votes, an archaic system dating back to the founding of the country, which is totally undemocratic. Trump himself demonstrates that you could lose the election and then win. You cannot get as many votes as your opponent, and yet you become president. Sometimes we talk about America's just been a great democracy from its beginning. No, it's a flawed democracy. It's a democracy that excluded large numbers of people for much of our history: women, African-Americans, others. It's a democracy in which today there are States trying to repress the right to vote. More power to Stacey Abrams, obviously, but there's... Again, these two traditions are in conflict here. One very democratic; one very undemocratic. Again, they're both alive and well.

Karen:

It's a perfect moment. I think for us to segue to you reading of it. We'd like to hear directly from the work that inspired our jury to elevate it. So if you don't mind from your most recent book, reading a passage that feels pertinent to what you've just said.

Eric:

Yes. A couple of little excerpts. One is really the beginning of the book, the preface, this sort of is relevant at the moment, but seeing what we had yesterday, it's about the way history is still living with us. So this is the preface to my book, the civil war and the reconstruction period that followed from the pivotal era of American history:

The war destroyed the institution of slavery, ensured the survival of the union and set in motion, economic and political changes that laid the foundation for the modern nation. During reconstruction,

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the United States made its first F attempt flawed, but truly remarkable for its time to build an egalitarian society on the ashes of slavery. Some of the problems with those years haunt American society today, vast inequalities of wealth, empowered, terrorist violence, aggressive racism. But perhaps the era's most tangible legacy. So the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the US constitution. The 13th irrevocably abolished slavery, the 14th, constitutionalized the principles of birthright, citizenship, and equality before the law and the 15th aim to secure a black male suffrage throughout reunited nation.

Eric:

Then I go on to write about these three amendments and just one other little excerpt here. This is the chapter on the 13th amendment, which irrevocably abolished slavery throughout the entire nation:

In his second inaugural address delivered on March 4th, 1865 as the civil war drew to a close, Abraham Lincoln described the destruction of American slavery as astounding. Lincoln, who always chose his language carefully was justified in using so dramatic and uncommon a word astounding. It appears only three other times in his entire collected works to be sure in retrospect, the abolition of slavery seems inevitable. A preordained result of the evolution of American society or in some tellings, a logical outgrowth of the ideals of the American revolution. Yet it is important to remember that despite decades of anti-slavery agitation, there were more slaves in the United States when the war began than at any point in our history. Slave owners and their allies had controlled the federal government for nearly the entire period, since the founding of the Republic.

Eric:

In 1858, the *Chicago Tribune*, a major journalistic voice of anti-slavery sentiment, flatly declared that no man living would see the end of American slavery. And then I go on to show how the slavery issue developed during the civil war and how the 13th amendment was conceived and passed and ratified at what it meant, or at least the debate over what it meant, which still goes on today. But I wanted to begin by making people rethink the notion, which comes so naturally to us that, well, the end of slavery was just inevitable. It wasn't. It wasn't inevitable. And it took a vast war with terrible loss of life to actually bring this institution to an end.

Karen:

And you have another beautiful sentence here where you'd say it played out over time, arose from many causes and was the work of many individuals.

Eric:

Right. In a weird way, that sentence is an effort to evade a question, which historians debated a lot in the 1990s, early 20th century. I think it's faded a bit, but it's "Who freed the slaves?" Was it Abraham Lincoln with his Emancipation Proclamation? Was it Congress? Was it the military? Was it slaves themselves who ran away from the plantation? So my answer is yes, it was all of them. It wasn't any one person or moment, but it was a complicated historical process.

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Karen:

And you have an entire book on President Lincoln, "The Fiery Trial," which I love. I love the title. You're very careful not to lionize him despite in the face of all that we hold dear about him.

Eric:

Well, the title comes from Lincoln, of course, the fiery trial in one of his messages to Congress, I think 1862, the fiery trial through which we pass. Lincoln, I don't necessarily lionize Lincoln, but I certainly admire Lincoln. And I begin by saying, I admire him as a writer. Lincoln was a master of the English language. You cannot read his writings. Mostly public speeches. We don't have a lot of letters, diaries, anything like that with Lincoln, unlike, let us say Thomas Jefferson, but we have his public statements of speeches, which are magnificent in that choice of language. And this was a man who had one year of formal schooling and his entire life. He was just about entirely self-educated. And yet he mastered the language as well as any president, maybe other than Thomas Jefferson.

Eric:

So yes, I wrote a book a while ago, "The Fiery Trial" about Lincoln's relationship to slavery, the evolution of his attitudes and policies toward slavery, race. When that book came out, one of my good friends, who's part of the Lincoln industry historically speaking said to me I really like your book because now you're on Lincoln side because I had criticized. And I said to myself, that's not really what I'm trying to do. I'm either on Lincoln side or against Lincoln side, that's not how I think about what I'm doing. I'm trying to deal with Lincoln as a complex figure as a whole. [inaudible 00:16:43] with great strengths and some weaknesses. But my main argument of course, was that Lincoln changed. Lincoln grew Lincoln's views evolved. Before the civil war, Lincoln shared many of the racial prejudices of his society, but he outgrew many of them during the civil war.

Eric:

That's the greatness of Lincoln. He wasn't born ready to sign him emancipation proclamation at age one, he grew up and he was still growing at the time he was killed. And that's the evolution I try to trace. You can't freeze Lincoln at any one moment and say, there is the quintessential Lincoln. People try to do that. They take one, quote, one speech, one letter and say that is Lincoln, but no Lincoln is in motion all the time. But that's what great leadership is in a time of unparalleled crisis. You can't just stay stuck in every old idea. You need to be flexible and open-minded and react to the situation. So yeah, I don't lionize Lincoln. I'm not of those who just wants to knock him off his pedestal either. I try to tell the story as I see it.

Karen:

Once again, you aren't binary.

Eric:

Oh, okay. Right. I try to do that. Right.

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Karen:

And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk* is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. We now return to the conversation.

Karen:

And I have to say, I was also thinking about your very first work in light of our historic week, "Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men," which came out of your doctoral work at Columbia, where you were looking at the roots of the Republican party, that published 51 years ago. And good gosh, look where that party [inaudible 00:18:44]

Eric:

Well, yeah, it is a little disconcerting that your math is correct, of course. But to think back now, 51 years ago is a little disconcerting.

Karen:

You were a protege.

Eric:

More to the point it's still in print. That's the great thing. And people still read it. Then they talk to me about it. Occasionally, I give a lecture somewhere and someone says, "I've read a number of your books, but I think your best book is Free soil, free labor, free men." And I say, maybe ungraciously, "You mean it's been downhill ever since." And of course they all know, no, that's not what I meant to... Fine. But yes, it's about the early Republican party. It was written as my doctoral dissertation, under the supervision of Richard Hofstadter, my mentor, one of the greatest historians of the previous generation there. It's very much a Hofstadter book in the sense that it's about the issues that Hofstadter's wrote about. And then I got them in by political culture, political ideas, how political parties get organized. It's not social history as come a little later, it's not about grass roots, kind of social life. It's about political culture really [inaudible 00:20:09].

Eric:

There was very little about... The early Republican party was not actually the subject of a lot of historical literature when I did it. I became interested in it because this was the '60s. And people were in the streets, demanding racial equality, and many of us students at that time wanted to know where this came from in our history. When I was in high school going way back, nobody really cared much about the history of slavery, the history of race relations. I recently checked the textbook that I had in high school, in the suburbs of Long Island, New York, and no African-American person was mentioned by name in that American history textbook. No Frederick Douglas, no Du Bois, no Booker T Washington, no Marcus Garvey, you name it. That just wasn't part of history. But with things happening in the street, we began to say, well, where does this come from? That's happening? Where in our history?

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Eric:

And I got very interested in the politics of change. The Republican party when it was founded was an anti-slavery party. That their purpose was to stop the westward expansion of slavery. And eventually, as Lincoln said, put it on the course of extinction. It may take a good while for that to happen. But you know, is there were people around like John Brown who said the way to deal with slavery is through invasion of the South. There were people like abolitionists who said, you cannot take part in a political system like this because it's tainted by slavery, abolitionists shouldn't vote or anything like that. And then they were anti-slavery politicians who said, "No, we're going to use the political system to further the anti-slavery cause." Because of what was happening in the sixties, both the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement. That's what interested me. I say this because one of the outages I used to always tell my students was every historian writes with one eye on the present. You don't take your answers from the present, but you take your questions, what interests you is reflecting the world around you.

Karen:

Yeah. That's beautifully put, I will remember that.

Eric:

Yeah. You don't find the answer by looking at today's newspaper, but that's why I was interested in this. And many other people began writing about slavery and anti-slavery at that time. So yeah, that book is still out there. I'm glad. I'm very glad that that is the case.

Karen:

Me too. And it speaks to one of my favorite Foner quotes, which is "a future requires a new past."

Eric:

"A new future requires a new past." Yeah. Here's what I mean by that. Again, I'm thinking back to when I was in high school and the history I learned there. I don't mean to criticize my high school history teacher, Mr. Graff. He was a very dedicated teacher. But as I said, the history we were taught then was very blunt, very even. There were no crises. There were no problems. American history was just a nice little straight line of greater and greater progress and freedom. And whatever problems existed had mostly been solved. And they pretty much disappear soon.

Eric:

When the '60s happened, that history collapsed for a simple reason. It could not have produced the world we were living in. That history couldn't lead up to the present. Why would thousands of people in the streets all the time. That history couldn't explain this? That's what I mean by a new history needs or requires a new past. Again, not something that is just purely politicized by the moment, but something that explains how we got to where we actually are today. And I think the events of yesterday and the Capitol will probably also lead to a reconsideration of some of our assumptions about American history. Where did this come from in our history? I think we will have to answer that question.

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Karen:

And it also seems so pertinent to the contemplation that black lives matter movement and action has called us to. I was thinking as people got on their devices and said, this isn't us. And the one of the lessons for me of black lives matter is this is us.

Eric:

It's all of us. It's definitely all of us. [crosstalk 00:25:08].

Karen:

The violence against George Floyd has been there all along.

Eric:

Oh, absolutely. Violence policing of African-American communities is as American as apple pie. This goes way, way back. And you know, let's go back to reconstruction, which is how I was looking at things. One of the catalysts for the 14th amendment, which really changed our constitution was the Memphis and New Orleans riots of '18 and '66. In those riots, white police officers took part in violent assaults on black communities. That's one of the reasons they put into the 14th amendment, this promise of the equal protection of the law. And they meant by that, not just legally quality, but actual protection. I mean, real physical protection. You need a different kind of policing if you're going to have equal protection of the law. So the role of the police has been very critical in establishing the parameters of American racial relations. And unfortunately it hasn't changed nearly enough as the events of last year certainly demonstrated.

Karen:

On a different note. One of the things that struck me when I reviewed a bit about you to prepare for our conversation is not only do you swim among and come from historians, but you also picked one to marry, in that your wife is a historian of dance. And I thought it would be interesting to know if in the dinner table conversation, some of her insights about the history of dance has influenced some of your work.

Eric:

My wife is a very, very talented and prominent history of dance. History of dance may I say is a small field. It's not represented at many universities. She's an internationally renowned person in that field. More people are interested in Lincoln, let us put it that way.

Karen:

That's true.

Eric:

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Right. But I think my wife's influence on me more is as a writer. She is the best writer that I know. She's a considerably better writer than I am. And I learned about writing from her. And moreover, we have a very cooperative writing relationship. We are each other's editors. We read everything that the other person writes, whether it's an op-ed piece in a newspaper or a book review or a book. Let me put it this way. I've just been reading the chapters of a book that my wife will be sending to the publisher within a month or two and making suggestions. This can lead to differences of opinion. Let's just put it that way, but still, I'm not sure that... And weirdly enough, if you go and look at my list of books, I've published one of them, which is actually a little misleading, you'll find dance for a city, which is a book, a catalog that went along with a museum exhibition that my wife and I curated on the history of the New York city ballet. This was 20 some odd years ago. The New York historical society did that exhibit.

Eric:

Unfortunately, because dance is a smaller field, the publisher insisted that my name be on the book as a co-author, even though it's my wife's project. I'm not a dancer historian. And she was a little annoyed about that. Let's put it this way. I insisted it has to be "with" Eric Foner. Just so she's number one. So I do have a sort of a publication on my record about the history of dance, but I don't claim any real expertise, but we do go, at least let's put it this way. When theaters were open, we did go a lot to see dance performances of all kinds in New York city. And our daughter was a professional ballet dancer in Europe. After she graduated from high school, she spent two years in Norway as a member of the Norwegian national ballet.

Karen:

Well, we need to name these women, Dr. Foner. Lynn Garafola. And your daughter's name is Daria?

Eric:

Yeah. Daria. Thank you. You're absolutely right. Lynn Garafola is my wife. Daria Foner is my daughter. Unfortunately like many ballet dancers, she suffered injuries. It's very hard on the body.

Karen:

It's so hard.

Eric:

She had knee surgery, she had foot surgery and she stopped and went to Princeton. Which is not a bad backup plan.

Karen:

Not at all.

Eric:

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And she's now a PhD in art history. So she's also a historian, although-

Karen:

There you go.

Eric:

... Renaissance Italian art, which I've learned a lot about by hearing from her.

Karen:

I love thinking about kinetic intelligence imbedded in dance.

Eric:

Interesting. I don't have any of that at all. So I wouldn't know directly. I mean, I'm sure there is, but I'm pretty uncoordinated. I think dancers have it. Absolutely. They can remember. They have body memory of complicated saying. I mean, to be in a ballet performance is a tremendously complicated thing. But they have this body memory, which enables them to do it. And it's pretty remarkable. Yeah. As I say, whatever talent my daughter has is hard work and inheritance, but not from me.

Karen:

I also need to mention, because it sticks to my breastbone, that Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes you as "the intellectual grandson of W.E.B. Du Bois."

Eric:

That's about as fine, a compliment as anyone can have. Du Bois is a great, great figure of American history. A total Renaissance man, a novelist, a historian, the sociologists, that political activists. I mean, you name it and Du Bois was there pioneer of the black movement. Pan-Africanism, editor of The Crisis for years, magazine of the NAACP.

Karen:

That's right.

Eric:

Unbelievable career. Born during reconstruction, 1868. Died 95 years later in 1963 on the eve of the March on Washington in Ghana, in Africa. And yeah, I guess what Skip Gates is saying, it's talking about as my book on Reconstruction, which is inspired by Du Bois. Du Bois' "Black Reconstruction in America" is a great monument of American historical writing, but it was written in the 1930s. It was written at a time when he wasn't -- both because of race and because of age -- wasn't in a position to travel around to archives in the South. So I borrowed with attribution, many of his insights, but it's a different book

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from mine, a research-based book out of the archives. His work is an inspiration to me and to anybody studying the history of reconstruction.

Eric:

And also the final chapter of that book called "The Propaganda of History." I don't care what the course. I asked my students to read it because it's a devastating indictment of the historical profession in this country. And the way for years, decades, they sacrifice historical truth on the altar of racism. And the reconstruction, the historiography of reconstruction is overlaid with this racist mythology, which was, it shows you why history is important. It's not just an academic exercise. What historians write matters to the society. The racist view of reconstruction as a disaster because black people are just not capable of exercising the right to vote intelligently was a fundamental justification for the disenfranchisement of black voters in the Jim Crow South. If people said, "Well, this is not democracy. These people need the right to vote." White southerners would say, "If we give them the right to vote, you'll have the horrors of Reconstruction again." And that kind of thinking lasted all the way into the 1950s and '60s.

Karen:

And it still lingers in 'lost cause' sentimentality.

Eric:

Yeah. I'm happy to be one of those who have helped to destroy the old racist view of reconstruction by no means the only one obviously, but because I think that matters to our society. I found it very interesting that last night, during the debate over the electoral votes, Lindsey Graham, the Senator from South Carolina, chided Ted Cruz for his plan to have an electoral commission look into the voting as happened during 1876 at the end of reconstruction. And he said, we don't want to relive the ending of reconstruction. This is Lindsey Graham, a very conservative guy from South Carolina with a fraught history. And yet he's basically embracing the idea that reconstruction was a good thing. And we shouldn't use our method [crosstalk 00:35:30].

Karen:

Dismantle it again.

Eric:

Which led to its abandonment. So I found that gratifying.

Karen:

I'm so glad you picked that up because of what a predicament Lindsey Graham is in our nation.

Eric:

Yeah. Two or three years ago, Lindsey Graham was calling for repealing the 14th amendment because it gives citizenship to anybody born in the United States, whether they are legally here or not.

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Karen:

We have flown through this time. And I'm so grateful for you and the work you've accomplished through your lifetime and that you continue to accomplish with is justly illustrated by the ringing phone you have today. And I want to allow you to go back to that work but thank you deeply for all you do Professor Foner.

Eric:

Well. Thank you. I'm always delighted to talk about history and it's a great honor to receive this award. So I'm extremely gratified. Thank you.

Karen:

The Asterisk is brought to you by Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby and the producer is Jay Williams, general manager of WOBU radio. I'm Karen Long. I manage the awards. This work today it's brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation WOBU radio and the Burten, Bell, Carr Development corporation.