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Lincoln and the Radicals

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Sunset on the Bayou. 90 × 114 in.
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Lincoln and the Radicals

a conversation with Tony Kushner

Daniel Itzkovitz

A SOMBER 1865 broadside, printed in the days after Lincoln's assassination, hangs on a wall in the middle of Tony Kushner's West Harlem office. It bears the image of an American flag above bold black letters: "God Will Avenge our Slaughtered Leader!"

"It's such a scream of pain," Kushner said about the image, "And I love the doubleness of it. It's a call for vengeance, but it's also in a way admonishing people to leave vengeance to the lord: 'we don't have to be vengeful because God will take care of it. . .'. We've been through other days somewhat like when Lincoln was killed, but there's something about the confluence . . . the fact that he was killed four days after the end of the Civil War, and on Good Friday, in a country that was so predominantly and deeply Christian. It must have been really . . . unbearable."

Kushner's ability to imagine complex and sometimes unbearable human experience sits at the heart of his work as a playwright, screenwriter, and political activist. And so does the tension in his analysis of the broadside: between the call to popular action, and the belief that a greater force might also be there—and *should* be there—to help those who need it.

Certainly such a tension matters to the critics of *Lincoln*, the blockbuster 2012 film Kushner wrote and Steven Spielberg directed. *Lincoln* received strong praise for its astonishing verisimilitude, its gorgeous screenplay, the sensitive performances of Daniel Day Lewis, Sally Field, Tommy Lee Jones and others, and above all its ability to turn a procedural debate in the House of Representatives into a compelling and compulsively entertaining tale about the power of government to make change.

But it also attracted a small but vocal group of detractors—many of them prominent historians and bloggers who like Kushner hail from the political left. Why, some asked, does the film choose to tell the story of slavery's end from the point of view of the government? Where were the abolitionists who toiled outside of Washington, D.C.? The feminists who worked tirelessly to bring an end to the peculiar institution? And why didn't the film feature more black characters? The debate heated

up on the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*, which convened an online roundtable; *The New York Times*, which published multiple letters and op-ed pieces over a period of two months—including a widely disseminated letter by eminent Lincoln historian Eric Foner; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which held a lively online debate about the film; and *The Nation*, to name just a few of the more notable forums.

At their most cynical, and sometimes vitriolic, some dismissed the film as blind to slavery (“In this film’s history of emancipation,” argued historian Barbara Krauthamer in the *Chronicle*, “enslaved people are simply the objects of a child’s curiosity”), dangerously misinformed (“Spielberg’s *Lincoln* helps perpetuate the notion that African Americans have offered little of substance to their own liberation,” historian Kate Masur charged in a hotly discussed *New York Times* op-ed), careless with its own “truthiness” (as both Maureen Dowd in the *New York Times* and Ty Burr in a long *Boston Globe* feature accused), and deeply destructive to progressive politics past and present (in *The Jacobin*, Aaron Bady’s “*Lincoln* Against the Radicals” sighs, “I’m very sorry that Spielberg . . . chose to make a movie praising exactly the type of political compromises that would destroy and delay so much of what Lincoln had begun to create. But I suppose it’s easier and more fun to thank white saviors than to think about those that they left behind.”). Over at *The Atlantic* Ta-Nehisi Coates was left wondering, “why aren’t more liberals defending *Lincoln*?”

Through it all, Kushner—a man fueled by the give and take of argument—remained largely silent. He had traveled similar roads before. He and Spielberg were challenged from both left and right after the release of *Munich*, their 2005 film that explored the ethical nuances of targeted political assassinations by Israel in the wake of the 1972 Munich Olympic massacre—an issue that of course resonates today in the shadow of U.S. drone strikes.

Almost lost in the discussion was the truly anomalous nature of the endeavor: after all, this was America’s favorite director—he of *ET* and *Close Encounters* and *Indiana Jones* and *Jaws*; the man who brought us *Schindler’s List*!—calling into question Israel’s tactics, and exploring shades of ethical gray normally anathema in Hollywood. In a multiplex landscape where morality tales are omnipresent, *Munich* pushed viewers to find their own way.

One might be tempted to suggest that part of the success of both *Munich* and *Lincoln* lies precisely in this capacity to generate such a powerful and diverse array of response, including sharp criticism. *Lincoln* is a movie about vigorous debate over the fate of the nation, conducted in the public sphere (“This is a 2 ½ hour movie of nothing but intense, political discussion,” Kushner observed, “all talk, all the time!”). Given

Kushner's vision of argument as a lynchpin of American democracy and progress, it's not surprising that *Lincoln* produced such debate as well.

Perhaps it's a sign of the movie's power and even its generosity that it opens itself up so fully to this kind of response. All over the country in the Fall and Winter of 2012, not only in review columns and Op-Ed pages but also in multiplexes and sidewalks and holiday parties, people were talking about the issues *Lincoln* raised—issues about race and politics and history that Americans do not always find easy to discuss frankly—arguing with and about the movie. Spielberg's genius for mass art and entertainment combined with Kushner's "visceral commitment to ideas made flesh" (to quote *The New York Times's* Ben Brantley) to produce an intelligent mass entertainment that got the country talking and debating with all the energy of the politicians it depicts. So while many of its critics hold themselves apart from *Lincoln*, we might also consider them participating in precisely the kind of impassioned debates that is one ideal end for Kushner's writing.

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In Kushner's work one imagines that the final word might never fully arrive. There is always a retort, a parry, a counter-argument that takes conversation down new and winding paths. A 2013 recipient of the National Medal of Arts and Humanities, Tony Kushner is of course best known for his groundbreaking work in the theater, most notably the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angels in America*, the two-part 1993 stage play that became, in 2003, an HBO miniseries. *Angels* emerged from the politics and terror of the AIDS epidemic of New York in the late 1980s, but despite its very local concerns, the play turns a raw, topical subject into an expansive exploration of betrayal, guilt, national politics, and the weight of history.

Subsequent plays experiment with genre, and feature emotionally and ethically complex characters wrestling with history and political change and the implications these have on their relationships with one another. The lovely musical *Caroline, or Change*, for instance, a model of unsentimental storytelling, broods over economic and racial disparity, and cross-racial and cross-generational connection and disconnection in the relationship between a black laundress and a motherless white boy in early 1960s Louisiana. And most recently, *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures* explores the history and aspirations of radical politics as they appear in one very argumentative family of a suicidal Brooklyn longshoreman trying to make sense of the twenty-first century.

Here, as in all of Kushner's work, the faith in ideas, politics, and conversation always accompanies the profoundly—and exasperatingly—human. One enters a world in which the sacred assumptions of the radical tradition are open to thought, to debate, and the complex dynamics of human interaction arrive always in surprising, uncompromising, and deeply moving ways. It should be no surprise, then, if *Lincoln* leaves us exhilarated, frustrated, moved, angry, exhausted, and above all, talking. Who could ask for anything more?

Daniel Itzkovitz: Tony, I heard an interview recently in which you said that you've become an evolutionary, rather than a revolutionary, leftist. You said this after discussing the left's growing comfort with its own powerlessness over the last thirty years.

Tony Kushner: Yeah, I've talked about this a lot, especially over the last four years . . .

Itzkovitz: I've been thinking about this as I've encountered the disparate responses to *Lincoln*, which turns out to be an interesting case study in how people read politics in the twenty-first century. *The Times's* A. O. Scott argues, for instance, that it's clearly a radical film, while others, like Aaron Bady in a long piece in *Jacobin*, have said that it's the opposite, that it stands against radicalism.

Kushner: It doesn't. Among other things, it presents a wholly admiring portrait of a great radical, Thaddeus Stevens. But I don't dismiss Lincoln because he wasn't a radical, and for some people, that dismissal is the only acceptable response. I didn't read Bady's piece—but the stuff that I know of, like Jon Wiener's attack in *The Nation*, and Eric Foner . . . they were doing what people frequently do, which is to say that "this is not the film you should have made. Here is the film you should have made, which almost always ends up being based on my last book, which, you know, explains the truth of everything."

I have great respect for Foner as an historian, and I like *The Fiery Trial* a lot, but from what I've read, including Foner's *Reconstruction*, and from what subsequent history teaches us, slavery wasn't dead in 1865, it was nothing of the kind. Abraham Lincoln was murdered on April 15th, 1865, and Andrew Johnson became president of the United States, and had the (Thirteenth) Amendment not at that point already been within a few weeks of being ratified, preserving slavery would have been on the table, and I have no doubt that it would have become a negotiating point in Reconstruction. The passage of the Amendment in January precluded that.

You know, also, Foner's argument, which Weiner recapitulates, that Lincoln didn't need to be concerned about slavery, is sort of silly on the

face of it. Lincoln inarguably felt that he needed to get an amendment ending slavery through Congress, and we were making a film about what Lincoln thought, not what Eric Foner thinks he should have thought. Foner feels he shouldn't have been concerned, but Lincoln clearly *was* concerned.

Itzkovitz: Concerned in terms of getting the Amendment done in January as opposed to waiting for the new term to begin . . .

Kushner: Well, right, I mean he took on a very difficult, complicated, and politically risky task as essentially his first act of his second term in office, because he clearly felt some enormous urgency to it, and my reading is that his fear was that at the end of the war, with no military exigency to use as a pretext, that the North would not continue to support an amendment to abolish slavery immediately, and that he felt that he only had the time left before the war ended to get the Amendment passed. No one has successfully argued that that interpretation is incorrect.

I admire Frederick Douglass immensely, I admire Thaddeus Stevens, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Tubman . . . all these people are great heroes of American history. But it seems to me that the left, while being far closer to glory—in terms of being in the right about racial equality and hatred of slavery—was dangerously far away from a kind of realpolitik, a practical understanding of how the war might actually be won and how to bring about the death of legalized slavery in the United States.

A politics of personal purity is a luxury that comes with powerlessness, and a willingness to be a critic rather than a creator.

Take Salmon Chase, Lincoln's Treasury Secretary up until 1864, who was a man of many flaws. Chase was, in terms of anti-slavery politics, a moral giant, much better in terms of the whole issue than Lincoln was, certainly up until the emancipation proclamation. And like almost everyone else, Chase is endlessly advising Lincoln in ways that would have been catastrophic, as were the radicals in Congress, I mean urging Lincoln to immediately overstep his legal prerogatives as president to instantly turn the war in 1861 into a war of emancipation and abolition. There's no reason to believe that Lincoln was in any way wrong that the border states would not have stayed loyal to the Union if doing so meant abolition, and without the border states, we would have lost the war.

The film is saying that the processes of electoral democracy can create radical, even revolutionary, transformation of society. But these processes involve a degree of cunning and guile and strategy and

compromise that people who understand politics as an expression of personal purity are profoundly uncomfortable with. But a politics of personal purity is a luxury that comes with powerlessness, and a willingness to be a critic rather than a creator.

Itzkovitz: Well, there is also sometimes a confusion between a certitude about what's right, and a certitude about what's going to happen. Like that slavery certainly will end, or that the Thirteenth Amendment certainly will pass in the next term.

Kushner: Right, which I mean, is bullshit. Lincoln had had four years of learning that you couldn't count on any outcome with complete certainty, and part of his political genius was having an incredible sense of timing as to when the ground had been prepared enough and people would be ready to take on a radically new idea, and when you had to wait, and over and over again he knew when to act. You could always argue, well, if he had acted earlier he would have had the same results, but the fact is that *when* he acted, over and over again he radically advanced the anti-slavery cause, and he did it in very sure steps, and he almost never had to backtrack. It's pointless, I think, to argue

Obama didn't create the plutocracy, or recreate it. He hasn't dismantled it either. Did anyone imagine he would?

that he could have done it earlier, as radicals did back then. You know, I think in the summer of 1864, after they'd had two meetings and had gotten to like each other a great deal, and admire each other, Frederick Douglass was still canvassing in the northeast for another plausible candidate to run against Lincoln, I mean as late as the middle of 1864, and a year after the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed the abolitionists still didn't trust him.

Itzkovitz: People draw analogies between the back-channel arguments and various shenanigans that get pulled in the film in order to bring in the votes, and the struggles between Obama and the House these last four years. But it strikes me that we might draw another analogy as well: between the left's disappointment with Obama, and the left's—at least some vocal members of the left—disappointment with the film. Obama isn't doing what certain progressives want him to do, and neither is the film.

Kushner: When I started working on this in 2006, I never imagined I'd still be working on it for many years, and into the first term of the first African American president. The years of the Obama administration have had an enormous impact on the film. And the left's response to Obama has also.



Itzkovitz: The left's response to Obama?

Kushner: Absolutely. The impatience . . . you know, there were people blogging furiously that he betrayed us when they heard that Rick Warren was going to be speaking at the first inauguration, that it was already over. And then Tim Geithner, Larry Summers—I mean it was one thing after another, just bad news, bad news, bad news, and then of course, everything that he did was wrong.

Itzkovitz: The drones, that he was recreating a plutocracy in a similar way that . . .

Kushner: He didn't create the plutocracy, or recreate it. He hasn't dismantled it either. Did anyone imagine he would? Does anyone know how, overnight, that's supposed to happen? Should he not use drone technology? It seems to me absolutely impossible to ask that of any president. The U.S. government, like all governments, will always have terrifying powers of destruction and surveillance. Do you then reject the idea of government? Or do you fight to make sure that government is in the hands of decent, sane, responsible people. At least since 2000

Tobacco: The Holdouts.

90 × 114 in.
 Courtesy of the estate of Robert Colescott and Arthur Rogers Gallery.
 ©1987 Robert Colescott.

we hear less repetition of the whole “Democrats and the Republicans are exactly the same” gobbledygook—though it still gets said.

It’s something I’ve been feeling for a really long time: that the progressive community, the left is eternally grappling with dreams of revolution that at this point have very little connection to any plausible, actual historical eventuality, or so it seems to me. There’s an underlying faith, or fantasy maybe, in an immediate, instantaneous, and maybe necessarily violent break between the bad old world and the good new world that will come. . . . It’s messianism in another form I think. And I don’t want to disparage the revolutionary tradition; my play, *The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures*, is really very much about the difference between evolution and revolution, and there’s a great tradition and a passionate response to history in the dream of revolution that’s of great significance and isn’t easily dismissed.

But the problem is, I think, that it’s sort of lovely to have no control over actual, on the ground events, because then you don’t have to compromise; you can always speak from a position of clarity and purity because you don’t have to worry about the consequences of your actions, and you’re also not limited by law. But I mean we didn’t elect a king, we elected a president, and I think an astonishingly effective, in fact a great president. I’m very happy—I think everyone decent, openly or secretly, is happy that we turned out in sufficient number to get him re-elected.

In a way it’s a lesson for me that we have also changed, that we turned out and made sure that happened, and his percentages in 2012 were pretty comparable to, and in some cases better than what they were in 2008. And then on the other hand, he was up against an absolutely dreadful candidate, who actually got himself recorded saying that he didn’t give a shit about half the country.

So, you know, what would have happened had there been somebody other than this feckless, creepy, robotic billionaire running against Obama? Would we have done as well? And are we going to do as well in the midterm elections, or are we going to have a repeat of 2010? People said before the election that all Obama cared about is getting re-elected, but it’s all I cared about! If you care about anything, that should be the thing you care about most. Because the things that you care about: climate change, LGBT rights, income inequality, regulation, poverty, education, on and on and on . . . making sure that man got re-elected, and keeping the White House in Democratic hands, and regaining the House and improving our control in the Senate, that’s what gives us the best shot that we have. And I’m not saying that he’s perfect or that I agree with everything that he does, or that the administration does, but it seems to me a recognizably progressive administration. And that’s tremendous. How can you not care passionately about that?

And right now one of the two parties in our two-party system simply doesn't believe in government, and its only job is to make government not work, so, you know, we barely have the Senate, and we could lose it in the midterm.

Itzkovitz: That strikes me as one of the ways that *Lincoln* is not fully analogous to our contemporary situation, in that Democrats did ultimately vote for this constitutional amendment put forth by a Republican president, in a way that it seems hard to imagine in the present.

Kushner: Except that there was a great analogy in the lame duck session in 2010, when Obama said—to the great horror of everybody, from *The New York Times* to various people on the left—“OK, you want to hang on to the Bush tax cuts for another two years? Go ahead and do it.” By doing that, instead of letting the Republicans shut down the government with a meaningless squabble over these tax cuts that were going to expire anyway, he helped keep government functioning, he helped get the extension of jobless benefits, which he had to get, and the House got rid of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell.” He said, “fine, take the cuts off the table, we won't fight about that, you can have it.” And then in a press conference that no one paid any attention to, he said something like “it's like a fetish or a totem with these guys; you've got to let them have their play-thing. The minute you talk to them about taking their tax cuts back you can't talk to them anymore.”

He said it as clearly as possible, but still progressives diagnosed him as suffering from Stockholm syndrome. People write endlessly about how he's weakened because he believes in bi-partisanship. Maybe it offends me as a dramatist, but there is absolutely no way that Barack Obama, as smart as he obviously is, genuinely believes that Boehner, or Mitch McConnell, God forbid, or Lindsay Graham, are people who he can genuinely negotiate with.

Itzkovitz: I really love your musical *Caroline, Or Change*, and one of the reasons I love it is that there are all of these potentially easy and familiar moments that are available to it that it refuses, especially in the relationship between Caroline, the black laundress and Noah, the motherless white boy whose family she works for. It just doesn't go to those sentimental places you might imagine it going, and at the same time it finds a way to be really powerful. It doesn't resolve itself in any easy place, and it imagines absolutely vivid, dense . . . uncomfortable lives for these characters.

The progressive community, the left is eternally grappling with dreams of revolution that at this point have very little connection to any plausible, actual historical eventuality.

Kushner: Thank you.

Itzkovitz: So I was thinking about *Caroline* while reading some of the critiques of *Lincoln*, especially those that wonder why the film doesn't feature more black characters—Frederick Douglass, or more likely, Elizabeth Keckley [Mary Todd Lincoln's seamstress, who does play a minor role in the film, played by Gloria Reuben].

Kushner: As I said, this is a film about Lincoln, and about government, not about slavery. But I'm sympathetic to that critique. African American slavery has been so radically under-represented in popular art and popular entertainment. I mean there are so few films that attempt to deal with it. The history of slavery is cinematically, outrageously under-represented, not just in film, but in all media, but certainly in film, and it's a central aspect of American history that America has really failed entirely to come to grips with.

I had interesting conversations with Steven about this. It's difficult to represent the evil of slavery, because the evil of slavery is not whips and chains. I mean those are part of the evil of slavery, but the real horrors of slavery are quieter, and actually harder to dramatize, because slavery insinuates itself, it begins as an external but becomes an internal state, there's a soul murder that's being done to slaves that is a life-long process, and a generational process that's very hard to represent. I'm not saying that it's not doable; I think it's absolutely doable.

Itzkovitz: Where have you seen it done? I've always felt that the major attempts to represent slavery—the mini-series *Roots*, say—tend to be really earnest, but ultimately fall flat because they're trying to present something unimaginable in realist terms.

Kushner: I think Toni Morrison has done it in novels, which interestingly have not succeeded as films. But the thing that's hard about it, and one of the things that's made it difficult, even for people of good faith to address in American history, is that you're dealing with a kind of deep, interior damage that's done to any people who are told they don't belong to themselves. And the destruction of any kind of coherent culture . . . Coherent cultures form in spite of oppression, there were slave cultures that emerged under the eye of slave owners, but they were the kind of cultures that have to be developed in complete secrecy, and are shaped by oppression, and slave cultures were vulnerable to systematic destruction in ways that ghetto cultures, any other oppressed minority cultures, which can have a certain amount of expansiveness, were not.

I don't think representing slavery is something that we can't do, but it's just something that we haven't done yet. We're saying that it's

difficult or impossible to do because nobody's figured it out yet, but somebody will.

One of the criticisms of *Lincoln* was that the only depiction of slavery in the film were in still photographs, which are fairly mild photographs because there were no other kind. The lynching photographs that everyone's familiar with are mostly from the time of Jim Crow segregation, and there were no photographs of atrocities or horrors connected to slavery that I know of, and when the question has been raised to me: "why don't you just leave Washington and show slavery?" there were two answers to that. We made a decision, and I think it really paid off, to stay within the very claustrophobic world of these people who decided to pass the Amendment, we chose to show the world they were contending with, and not leave that world to editorialize by showing things that they wouldn't have seen or experienced.

These were people—including Abraham Lincoln—who had very limited personal experience with slavery. They were all from the North, aside from a few border states, but for the most part the people who really knew slavery first-hand had seceded. A lot of the people who died fighting for the Union had no experience with slavery at all.

And in a movie that is attempting in two and a half hours to give dramatic representation to the difficult battle in the House of Representatives to pass an amendment bill, with no language for showing slavery, what do you show? Images of people with manacles, or images of people out in the fields picking cotton are not successful as

representations of slavery. They don't begin to describe the horror of the institution. And it feels to me that we made the right decision not to make some sort of token nod in the direction of something as imponderably vast as that, and instead rely on our audience's awareness of the horror of it, and stay with the story that we're telling.

But this has been one of the great silences, one of the great gaps in American culture production and reception: We don't have a great body of films that I'm aware of exploring the condition of slaves, exploring what slavery was on a daily basis.

Itzkovitz: Well, except for *Gone with the Wind*.

Kushner: Exactly!

Itzkovitz: Did you think about this history as you were making the film?

Kushner: Well, yeah, of course I did, but that's what I'm saying. One is faced with that and then you make a decision: is it just unwise to make a movie about Abraham Lincoln? Because although the face is enormously familiar, this really is the first film made by a studio in seventy-two years to deal with Lincoln, and it's the first serious film—I'm excluding D. W. Griffiths' *Abraham Lincoln*—to deal with Lincoln's presidency. All the other good movies made about Lincoln, like John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*, are about his life before the election . . . or *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, which stops on the night of the election. And so I felt that, again, given the times that we live in, with the Reaganite rejection of the idea of

government still deeply entrenched and given the extent to which it seemed to me that Lincoln was an exemplary statesman and an exemplary politician, a politician in the best sense of the word, this is somebody whose life and work gives extraordinary evidence of how politics can bring about enormous, significant progress and transformation.

And because I think he's a genius and an extraordinary human being I felt like, yes, absolutely, there's every reason to make a movie about Abraham Lincoln right now. Saying, "I won't make a movie about Lincoln because I should be making a movie about slavery" is making a false choice, there shouldn't be a choice between these two subjects—both are completely worthy and important. In trying to dramatize the story of Lincoln we were very much aware of the fact that we were going to be making a movie that was set primarily in the halls of the federal government, which meant that it would primarily be involving the doings of white men. That was the world in which he worked. And it seemed to me we are at a point in history where that choice would be acceptable and understandable. As I think in fact turned out to be the case.

You know I understand the frustration at the lack of representation, and the lack of focus on, important aspects of African American history, especially slavery itself. And I think a certain amount of that frustration understandably attached itself to this movie, and to its central figure—a certain amount of frustration has always attached itself to Lincoln in that regard.

Itzkovitz: Exactly, which is why some people were left hoping for more about the connections he did have, the enticing stories that the script initially began with his first encounter with Douglass . . .



Summertime. 84 × 72 in.

Courtesy of the estate of Robert Colescott and Arthur Rogers Gallery. ©1995 Robert Colescott.

Kushner: My feeling was that, and I knew this the minute I took this assignment, I really didn't want to invent characters having an effect on Abraham Lincoln that didn't exist, or to get sentimental, so that the story of Lincoln and slavery, or Lincoln and government, or the Civil War and the Union, conformed to modern sensibilities. The government of the United States of America was completely male, and completely white at the time, and Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States of America, and at no point in his life did he have any sustained or intimate involvement with black people—slaves, free people of color—I mean he just didn't. Because of where he lived, and the life he had lived, he had a very brief acquaintance with very few people who were barbers and valets, and he found himself, and to a great extent put himself in the position, of having a central role, an essential, critical role in the emancipation of the slave population of the United States. And he did that without very much awareness of what their lives were like. He proceeded from a few simple but profound assumptions. He says: "I never knew a man who wished to be himself a slave. Consider if you know any good thing, that no man desires for himself." In the Second Inaugural he has that phrase—that it's wrong to ask a just God for assistance in "wringing [your] bread from the sweat of other men's faces"—sort of clumsy, but all the more effective in its awkwardness. "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master." There's a stark and simple appeal to human conscience that he made, and that he found inside himself.

I was hoping that we are at a point in history—which is not to say that we're past all of these concerns by any means—but that we're at a point in the history of this country where people could understand what we were trying to do, and what we were making a movie about. This is not a movie about slavery. This is a movie about government, and the monstrous human evil that government happens, effectively, to at least legally eliminate. In the film that we made is legally sanctioned institutionalized human slavery, but we were never attempting to make a movie about slavery.

I simply don't feel that it can be said that Frederick Douglass influenced Abraham Lincoln. There's a new line of thought that between the two of them, there was a great dyadic thing going on, but it's just not true. Lincoln had many influences, as everyone does; but no single living person had an entirely shaping influence on Abraham Lincoln. That's one of the amazing things about him. I love *Team of Rivals*, the book that the movie is based on, but what Doris Kearns Goodwin is getting at with *Team of Rivals* is really not that he pulled all of these people with different opinions in and listened to all of them. In a certain sense he neutered all of his political adversaries by bringing them in, and he

used them for the things that they were good at doing. But he didn't listen to very many people. He took very specific kinds of advice, like when Seward said "don't announce the Emancipation Proclamation until we've had a big victory, or it will look like you're doing it for the wrong reason." So he agreed with Seward about that and waited until Antietam, but the idea of emancipation, you know, is something that he arrived at on his own. And as much as he genuinely admired Frederick Douglass—after the murder, Mary Lincoln sent Douglass one of Lincoln's walking sticks, and after he gave the second inaugural, Lincoln sought Douglass out in the reception line—he had invited Douglass to the White House—and he got out of the line and went to find Douglass, and said "nobody seemed to like the speech very much; what did you think?" Douglass called it "a sacred effort." That meant everything to Lincoln. They might have become close friends; who knows what would have happened? But they had very different paths.

I wanted to make a movie about the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which I believe is a legitimate thing to make a movie about, and Steven wanted to make it, and Frederick Douglass was in upstate New York during the entire month of January. He just wasn't there, and I wasn't going to move him into place and make him a kind of secret author of that.

Itzkovitz: Right, but to bring Elizabeth Keckley into the conversation . . .

Kushner: Keckley was the only African American who was actually on the scene, in the White House.

Itzkovitz: . . . And who left a record.

Kushner: Well, she dictated a book to a white guy, who she then claimed had misrepresented her in certain aspects. She's pretty tough on Mary in the book, and after it was published, Mary never spoke to her again. Keckley was a complicated woman, and a very great and amazing person. You could make an extraordinary movie out of the life of Elizabeth Keckley.

Itzkovitz: Yeah, it would be interesting to film the same month from Keckley's point of view.

Lincoln put himself in the position of having a central role, an essential, critical role in the emancipation of the slave population of the United States. And he did that without very much awareness of what their lives were like.

Kushner: But again, she was Mary Lincoln's friend and dressmaker, and in *Behind the Scenes at the White House*, she's very modest . . . she doesn't say, "and I took Abe aside and told him this and that . . ." The book is sort of remarkable in that regard. So I felt like I found a way to have her actually speak to Lincoln, and stay within what seemed true to me.

Itzkovitz: There's that amazing, quick aside when she says to Lincoln's son Tad, "I was hit by a shovel when I was younger than you."

Kushner: A fire shovel, when she was five. It's a story she tells in the book, that she was left to rock a baby, a white baby, and she rocks the cradle too hard, so I mean she must have really been rocking it hard,

**I simply don't feel
that it can be said that
Frederick Douglass
influenced Abraham
Lincoln.**

and the baby falls on the floor, and she's afraid to touch it, because she's been told not to touch it. And so she gets a fire shovel and picks the baby up with a fire shovel and dumps it back in the crib. When they come back in it's screaming and it's covered in soot, and her mistress took the fire shovel and beat her with it. So you get these little glimpses. And there was a scene about the contraband camp, where refugee slaves were living that didn't make it into the final cut, simply because, again, it didn't work in terms of the particular story that we were telling, the subject couldn't be explored the way it required in the time we had to tell our tale.

I'd also say that, again, with some of the critiques that I've read, and I think there's a parallel with what some people say about the Holocaust—that slaves ended slavery. Lincoln couldn't have had anything to do with the end of slavery, because slaves essentially freed themselves.

Itzkovitz: This is a big focus in some of the prominent critiques of the film.

Kushner: Right, and it sort of makes me think of these people who say . . . well, nobody claims that the Jews liberated themselves from the camps, but there's a sort of negative version of that, when people say, I think appallingly, "why did we go like lambs to the slaughter?" Almost as if the victims of the Holocaust shared blame in their own destruction, because they were "passive."

This kind of thinking, which originates in a legitimate need to identify resistance and agency in the victims of oppression and murder, gets vulgarized to a point at which it starts to sound suspiciously like Republican blame-the-victim bootstrapism—the notion that the means of liberation always lie with the people that are oppressed, no matter how terrible the oppression, and that they liberate themselves, or should do so, and that no other narrative is acceptable. If you believe

this, you must reject a suggestion that one way in which slavery ended was that the U.S. Congress acted in concert with Abraham Lincoln to make it unconstitutional. You can understand this kind of thinking, its origins in progressive reclamation of history, but if you get to the point where the possibility of assistance in emancipation must be written off as patriarchal and reactionary, are you still advancing a recognizably progressive or even reality-based account of how human beings achieve progress?

I have very serious questions about the claim that slavery had essentially ended during the course of Sherman's march through the South, and that there was no danger that, for instance, Andrew Johnson, assuming the presidency after the assassination—had slavery still been constitutionally possible—would not have used the enormous force of the federal government to return slaves to their plantations and to restore the property relations that had existed before the war as part of a deal to make peace. I mean, to me, this is not an inconceivable circumstance.

We don't know what would have happened, but what we know is that when the war actually ended it was no longer possible, according to the U.S. Constitution, to own slaves, so that ended that. And that seems to me tremendously significant.

Itzkovitz: Could we talk about activism and the politics of race? Obviously black voices have played a major role in your work, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little about how black politics has shaped your larger take on the world, your larger take on the history of politics.

Kushner: One of the central stories—probably *the* central story—for anyone interested in how progress happens through political means is the history of the African American Civil Rights Movement. It's an apogee of democracy, an apotheosis of the idea of democracy and of due process of law, and of government acting in concert with people on the street to achieve a kind of revolution.

The great tragedy, it seems to me, of the 1960s is that exactly at the moment that the African American Civil Rights Movement was catalyzing the enactment of major anti-racism and anti-poverty legislation, and really bringing about the basis for a great society, a genuine transformation of the fundamentals of our society, the anti-war left became so disillusioned with the lies of the government and with the monstrous crimes being committed in Viet Nam that there was an abandonment, a kind of rejection, or repudiation of government—at precisely the moment that government was, in another arena, namely the arena of civil rights, proving itself. We began walking away from government, believing that nothing could be expected from government and law other

than malevolence, and so we abandoned the machinery of government to the reorganizing right that by 1980 was really ready and able to step in and take it over and drive us all straight to hell.

But the story of America in the King years is where I always turn to for a renewal of faith in democracy and in the ability of a people, collectively, as citizens, to self-govern, and to improve their lives and to collectively improve the lives of everyone through political actions . . . and through tremendous sacrifice.

Itzkovitz: People make an argument, obviously, that the struggle for gay marriage is a civil rights issue, and draw a lineage . . .

Kushner: There's a clear lineage. The Fourteenth Amendment is this compromise, if I understand this correctly, on the way to the Fifteenth Amendment, but the Fourteenth Amendment turns out to be of earth-changing significance. And the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments are direct results of America's trying to come to terms with what was at that point 100 plus years of slavery and the beginnings of Reconstruction. Everything that emanates from the Fourteenth Amendment in terms of advancing civil rights, and a lot does, is directly indebted to the African American struggle for enfranchisement. Feminism is a movement that begins to cohere in this country around abolition and the struggle against slavery, where a number of women who then became the first pioneers of feminism found their political voices. The model of African American struggle for civil rights very much became the model struggle for feminists, and anti-war activists, and Native Americans, and also for the LGBT community. The template was created by SNCC and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Council . . . those are the groups that created in the twentieth century the model—with some help from American labor—for non-violent disobedience and for organizing. So we're all enormously indebted.

I think it's been a difficulty in the fight for same-sex marriage, and LGBT liberation that at times certain parts of the African American community, for reasons of religious faith, have found it difficult to make common cause with the LGBT community, and even have found it offensive that comparisons are drawn between our struggle for liberation and their struggle for liberation. But I think that's changed a lot, and it's changed very quickly. I think the president has helped in that regard, and I think the truth has helped in that regard, and I think that the anticipated alliance between African American churches and right wing homophobes has really not materialized at all, and that we've made enormous progress in the African American community as well as everywhere else.

It's a civil rights struggle. I think people understand that *Loving vs. West Virginia* is a completely reasonable precedent to turn to, and that the ban on intermarriage is exactly like the ban on same-sex marriage, and that the arguments used against same-sex marriage were used against . . . you know, several apocalyptic warnings about "the end of the world if this happens" were the same. I think people get it. I think we understand it that way.

Itzkovitz: As someone who grew up in the South during the Civil Rights Movement, some of these connections must have been there for you, even then . . .

Kushner: Well, I grew up in the southwest corner of Louisiana in the 1960s, so I had a particularly bayou version of the Civil Rights Movement, but probably the most powerful thing for me was in my adolescence, going to a high school that was integrated by federal mandate and bussing, and having—and this I think was one of the transformative events of my life—I went to a high school that was 100% white before I entered, and the year I entered, in 1972, it became 50% black, 50% white. And then, a couple of years after I left, the white people floated a bond issue, and built a high school so far away from the African American part of town that it became all white again, and Lake Charles High where I went to school, became all black, and they created segregation again, which is something that Nixon allowed.

Itzkovitz: How were all these changes formative for you?

Kushner: During the years that I spent in high school, I saw social engineering work, I mean, I saw it change people. The first year of bussing and integration there were some fights in the parking lot—nothing horrible—between white students and black students, and by the end of the year there was a white prom king and a black prom queen!

Itzkovitz: They were there together?

Kushner: Well, yeah, it was this incredibly gorgeous hippy guy . . . (I had such a crush on him . . . I was a sophomore, he was a senior) and this African American girl, who was incredibly smart, straight-A student and everything, but they were both on the debate team—I was on the debate team—which was like the center of integration.

Itzkovitz: That's some impressive social engineering. You said that your sense of Civil Rights Movement had a sort of bayou flavor, and Louisiana seems among other things like a really interesting diasporic space. I imagine that it must have been very different from growing up elsewhere in the South . . .

Kushner: Yeah, well it's not a pure place. It's a very heterogeneous environment, and the bayou country of Louisiana, it's not any kind of racial paradise or anything, but it's a very different world from the rest of the South and always has been.

Lincoln focused intensively on New Orleans. I think, in addition to the importance of the Union controlling the mouth of the Mississippi,

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perhaps he knew that he had an opportunity in Louisiana to test certain ideas. The first time a President of the United States ever mentioned the possibility of black people voting was Lincoln in the April 11th speech about Louisiana Reconstruction. That's the speech John Wilkes Booth listened to, which is maybe when he made his mind up to murder Lincoln. He's talking about people in Louisiana, and he'd been working behind the scenes in Louisiana to make that a possibility all along. I think he knew enough of New Orleans to know that enormous changes were conceivable there in a way that they weren't in Illinois, for instance, which at the time had some of the worst black laws in the non-slave-owning United States.

My memory of integration in Louisiana is that after that first year it sort of ceased to be an issue very quickly. Lake Charles High wasn't a great school: Louisiana public education is just really not all that good, but I was in classes with, and became friends with, black kids, and my northern cousins in liberal New York went to all-white private schools. I think that for those years, there was a real transformation of people and their relationships to one another and the world that was a direct result of the federal government saying "we're going to do this now. *Brown vs. the Board of Education* made it the law of the land, "separate but equal is not equal, and we're going to break down segregation." And it worked!

It's made me pay attention to a lot of the great society . . . the political initiatives that came out of the 1950s and 1960s, which really began to transform people, and society, and the world, the actual landscape. And it took a great deal of concerted, malevolent action to undo that. But you know, we got astonishingly close in the LBJ years, domestically, to the beginnings of real transformation of society. 🌐