

## **Portraits Podcast – *Glimpsing Freedom, With Dr. Deborah Willis & Dr. Rhea Combs* (Season 4, Episode 4)**

### **Kim Sajet:**

Imagine you're walking through an art museum and you see something really cool and you want to know more. You can read that little label next to the work of art, or you can touch it, smell it and feel the materials used to create it. Just kidding, you absolutely can't do that. But a new podcast from the Metropolitan Museum of Art uses the materials of art to tap all your senses. The show is called *Immaterial*, and every episode goes deep into what a particular material like paper, jade or clay can tell us about history and humanity. Go beyond the visual and subscribe to *Immaterial* today.

### **Separate Audio Clip (Cory Booker):**

"Let America be America again. The land that never has been yet but yet must be the land where everyone is free. Oh yes, I say play in America. Never was America to me, but I swear this oath: America will be.

[INTRO MUSIC]

### **Kim Sajet:**

Welcome to Portraits. I'm Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. That was a clip of Senator Cory Booker at the confirmation hearing of Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson. He was riffing off a verse by Langston Hughes to remind his audience that a lot of people have fought tooth and nail for American ideals, even as they were shut off from America's Promise. Take for example, a man who arrived at a camp of Union soldiers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. He was barefoot and his clothes were in tatters. His name was Gordon, and he was fleeing slavery. According to an article that appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, he decided to enlist in a black regiment and fight for the American ideals that he himself had never experienced, like equality and freedom. The article also featured an engraving taken from a disturbing photograph. Here was Gordon, the article said, after medics had made a horrific discovery. His back was covered in a tangle of scars from a vicious lashing, possibly more than one. The photo was widely circulated by abolitionists. And in fact, it became famous. Here was proof of the brutality of slavery laid bare. This episode, we look at photographs of black Civil War soldiers. Photographs taken of them and photographs taken for them. Because it turns out, there is a very big difference. To kick things off, I spoke with Dr. Rhea Combs. She is the Director of Curatorial Affairs here at the National Portrait Gallery. And she says that for these troops, photography was a form of resistance.

### **Dr. Rhea Combs:**

You're resisting the ways in which people may perceive a black person. So then ultimately, resistance becomes about dignity, about self-actualization and about agency.

### **Kim Sajet:**

So, the most affordable form of photography arrived with the invention of the cut to physique, right? Before that you had daguerreotypes, but they were still pretty expensive. And the character arrives on the scene in the United States in 1859, just two years before the Civil War starts. All of these things are

colliding at the same time. And then we have the Colored Troops. And these were units belonging to the Union army. They were recruited after the Emancipation Proclamation, and in fact, eventually accounted for about 1/10 of the total manpower of the Union army. So, can you tell us a little bit about the colored troops and the critical importance they played: I would argue in winning the war.

**Dr. Rhea Combs:**

There were approximately 179,000 African American men who served in the Union army. So you're absolutely correct to say that they were critical in helping to win the war. When you think about the Colored Troops, they had to endure so many injustices. I mean, many of them were denied pay; they weren't paid the same price. Yes, many of them fought on the battlefield, but then they also had positions that were drudgery. They had to dig the graves. So there was this tension between these philosophical beliefs of what it is you're fighting for, you know, freedom for justice, at the same time, still sort of dealing with the daily operations, if you will, of racism and prejudice so it's complicated.

**Kim Sajat:**

On the other side of the Civil War, Confederate troops forced 1000s of enslaved men to serve as cooks, camp servants and hospital attendants. Some of their photographs have been used to fuel a false narrative that romanticizes the Confederacy's defeat and paints the slave master relationship as some kind of a friendship or camaraderie. The North use photographs to further its narrative as well. For example, the photographs of Gordon, the man that I mentioned earlier, who escaped bondage and entered a union camp. We have two photographs of Gordon in the national collection, and they were both featured in Harper's Weekly on Independence Day in 1863. At the time, Harper's was the most widely read journal in the United States. And it fully supported the union cause. I asked Maria to describe the first of these images.

**Dr. Rhea Combs:**

And so in this particular image, we see Gordon in tattered clothes, but he doesn't have any shoes on he's looking directly into the camera he has on a hat, collared shirt, and then another sort of jacket. That, again, is very, very, very tattered and frayed. However, I choose to look at the face. The clean-shaven face. I choose to look at the crossed legs that provide a certain sense of self possession, that while he may have these tattered clothes, he still has a certain dignity and a certain pride here. And, you know, I am struck by the fact that he's just downright handsome.

**Kim Sajat:**

I mean he is, absolutely!

**Dr. Rhea Combs:**

He has, you know, kind of a youthful face and a little bit of a chiseled jawline.

**Kim Sajat:**

The photograph does not have a name written on it. Instead, on the back, he's described as contraband. At the time, the United States military regarded those who had escaped slavery as contraband of war.

**Dr. Rhea Combs:**

He looks like a gentleman; he looks like a gentle man.

**Kim Sajat:**

I also asked Rhea to describe the more famous photograph in his Harper's Weekly layout. It's the most dominant image on the page placed right in the middle.

**Dr. Rhea Combs:**

It is albumen silver print by Matthew Brady studio. All you see is sort of his back, you know, shirtless, his hand is on his waist so that you can kind of get a fuller picture of a very scarred back that is full of welts that have healed over and sort of form this kind of inter woven, interlaced, kind of look of tree branches if you will. So, it really becomes this kind of metaphor for the brutality of slavery. You know, while scars may heal, the trauma will persist. You know, photographs were able to be sent out far and wide. And this becomes a way to promote the anti-slavery movement and showcase the brutality.

**Kim Sajat:**

Yeah, it was such a shocking image and caused a sensation when it was released to the public. By the abolitionists, it was very much a political gesture. This body is being used to make a point. I'll be at noble one, which is to end slavery. So Gordon has been used as a tool in this case, as one journalist declared, quote: "this card photograph should be multiplied by 100,000 and scattered over the states". It tells the story in a way that even Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe cannot approach because it tells the story to the eye.

**Dr. Rhea Combs:**

Yes, it was sort of slightly, one might say, even anthropological in terms of the way one wants to document a moment.

**Kim Sajat:**

There's a third engraving based on a photograph on the Harper's Weekly page and it also features the man identified as Gordon. This time in his shiny new union uniform. Support for the Civil War was starting to flag around this time, but here was a heroic narrative to rally behind. Gordon's journey towards emancipation was complete. Or was it? In fact, more recent scholarship has thrown a few surprises our way.

**Dr. Rhea Combs:**

Because in fact, this is not one man. This is in fact, three different men.

**Kim Sajat:**

So wait a minute, wait a minute, I'm so confused. You heard it correctly. These three images in the Harper's Weekly Special Edition are actually three different people. Thanks to some sleuthing by the scholars Dr. David Silkenat at the University of Edinburgh, and by Dr. Bruce Lowry at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, we now know that the man in the first image, the Barefoot man and tattered clothes, was in fact named Gordon. But the man in the middle with a deeply scarred back, his name was Peter, and he actually escaped with Gordon from the same plantation on the same day. The

newspapers engraved illustrations generalize their features to make them look alike. And the third engraving, the man in the uniform. This one is also based on a photograph, but the soldier's name and his story are unknown to us. The same engraving was reproduced in a different publication in 1864. And that publication identified the soldier as a man formerly enslaved in North Carolina. In other words, these men's photographs were used for noble cause to push the abolitionist agenda. But in the process, their actual personal stories were erased.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC]

**Dr. Rhea Combs:**

There becomes this sort of thin line between exposing and exploiting. And I think that the exposure is key, and photographs allow us that opportunity, if you will, to expose injustice, whereas the exploitation may be when he is being presented to the world as part of an agenda. I'll be it a noble one. But to me, there's a very distinct way in which you know, someone is able to create a moment that they want to mark for themselves as historic, versus someone who is deciding that your body is going to become part of a historic narrative that they want to tell.

**Kim Sajat:**

On the other side of the break, we hear about a very different kinds of civil war photograph. The ones that soldiers had taken of themselves.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC]

**Kim Sajat:**

Photography and the Civil War kind of crashed into each other. Until then, portraits had mostly been reserved for people who could pay tons of money for a painting or a daguerreotype. But when the... format made photography affordable, it also became a tool for resistance. Abolitionist use photography to show what slavery look like and it was evil. And the activist Frederick Douglass used photography to show what black freedom looked like, and it was dignified. He wore sharp suits when he sat for a photograph, and he met the viewers gaze directly eye to eye. My next guest, Dr. Deborah Willis, has written a book about the choices that black Civil War soldiers made when they sat for their photographs. In them, she found something that was less about propaganda, and more personal. These were not meant for newspapers and pamphlets and politics. They had a totally different audience of wives and mothers, family, friends and loved ones. Dr. Willis is a photographic historian, author and artist, and she chairs the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School for the Arts. Her latest book is called "The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship". So Deborah, I wondered if we could start with you just describing for people at home who don't have the image in front of them this cover image that you chose. Could you go into some detail about what it is that you put on the cover of your book, "The Black Civil War Soldier"?

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

It's really exciting to have discovered this image, which is at the Smithsonian in the National African American Museum History and Culture. It is a photograph we identified as Nimrod Burke, who was a Civil War soldier who grew up in Virginia. What captivated me about this image was the way the

photographer work with the idea of citizenship in creating a tintype. The soldier is looking into the camera with his pistol at his breast with the hand as if he is swearing an oath for freedom or to fight for freedom with the way the pistol is at his breasts. But then there's a U.S. bare button that is enhanced through the color of gold. And the gold buttons that the photographer enhanced with the aspect of creating a live portrait. That history with the American flag, the eagle, I thought this one felt connected to the idea of citizenship in the way that I wanted it to explore. But also, the artistry was also a focus for me.

**Kim Sajat:**

Yeah, it's absolutely beautiful. And so, for those of you at home, he is placed in a frame that is made to look like gold. And above the oval in which the photograph is inserted is an eagle. On either side, there are furling flags. And below the image is a cannon with cannon shot piled up and the words E Pluribus Unum out of many one. As we know, it is the motto on the Great Seal of the United States. And it's actually in this hinge case. So on the other side, it is indeed, within this beautiful velvet casing. And if you were to close the hinge, you could carry it around in a pocket and it would fit in the palm of your hand. And I just want to bring up this quote. This was something that Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist and conscience of Abraham Lincoln, said: "once you let the Black man get upon his person the brass letter U.S, let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket. There is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship".

**Deborah Willis:**

Powerful.

**Kim Sajat:**

Isn't that powerful?

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

Yes!

**Kim Sajat:**

And you make the point in the book of the flag turning up so often in these photographs. Could you talk about that? And in fact, if you could describe the picture that I have in front of you now about what's happening in this picture. And what's in the background? That seems so extraordinary to me.

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

Yeah, this is an image of a soldier, a Black Union soldier in uniform. And to see this image is to reimagine a soldier who is likely about to enter a fight. And that's one of the aspects that I see a lot with these images of the soldiers, their bodies are erect. We often see images of the labored black body and it's bent over working, and these soldiers are erect out of the stereotype. But with the image, we see the American flag, we see color, we see the red, white and blue of the American flag and the stars. The way that the backdrop was painted, the background has trees, we see branches but also land. That these soldiers were fighting for land, for a piece of their Americana. And so, they were fighting to own land.

**Kim Sajat:**

One of the things that I find fascinating about this is that there is not even a pretense of trying to make it real in the fact that you can actually tell that it's a painted backdrop because the soldier is standing in a room and you can actually see the painted background on little sort of wooden feet. And so, to me this is also an image about being willing for the viewer to imagine a better future. It's not there yet, it's literally scaffolding behind him. But there is this possibility, as you said, of land, of nationhood with this flag. Photography's coming up at the same time as the Civil War, but they suddenly become a way to be personal and can be shared with family and can make choices about how you yourself want to be seen and how you want to be shown. What was the significance of the rise of portraiture for the black community at the time of the Civil War?

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

For me, I see a sense of desire. And when we think about going into to the photographic studio, at any time, even during the war, that there was a space for they can reimagine themselves. They could also consider the experience and reframe their current condition for a future of freedom. The photographic studio, the portrait studio was a central place for people to define themselves and redefine themselves. Some who were enslaved, some who were free, some were family members, but the main point was defining themselves as citizens.

**Kim Sajat:**

So formally, slave codes were such that men and women could not formally or legally get married. In fact, there was a statute written in 1853 by William Girdle that said, quote, "The slave has no rights. Of course, he or she cannot have the rights of a husband or wife. The slave is a chattel and chattels do not marry. The slave is not ranked amongst sentient beings, but among things and things are not married". So now you have emancipation happen and there is this real desire to formalize these marriages and of course, document couples and families. And again, it's in conjunction with the rise of photography. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

Tara Hunter published a book last year, or I think last year because seems like two years have merged into one.

[LAUGHTER]

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

On marriage and civil war and slavery and the importance of Black love during this time period. I thought it was really important to talk about the fact that there was a number of soldiers in my book and others that I read about who left their wives, left their partners, their children, to fight. And some of them were not married. But they were determined to return, and they fought for their children's freedom. So I think that that's an another important moment. When we think about marriage, we think about the expressive love moment.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC]

**Kim Sajat:**

One photograph in Deb's book evokes this love in an eye-catching way. It's a couple. Perhaps they're in their late teens. He's in uniform, and the buttons are tinted in gold. His belt also has gold touches and a big U.S. in the middle. He has his arm wrapped tenderly around the shoulder of a slim young woman in a gorgeous dress, gold earrings dangle from her ears, and gold rings adorn her fingers. And she casually leans an elbow on the table and looks directly into the camera. Deb presents this photograph with a letter that she found: a correspondence between another couple where the woman's name is Martha.

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

She wants to remind him about the abuse she received after he left for war by the plantation owners and reminded him to make sure that when you have a furlough come to see me. I just find this letter so perfect. You know, do not forget me and my children. Farewell my dear husband, your wife. You know, I felt these letters humanize these experiences in many ways,

**Kim Sajat:**

And they don't have the protection of their husbands with them. And they're doing their own battles at home and surviving. Talk about resistance and resilience. I mean the women were particularly resilient.

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

Exactly.

**Kim Sajat:**

Just finally, I wanted to ask if you could read out this quote by Frederick Douglass. Are you able to read that writing?

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

Yeah, I think so. I have my Sojourner Truth glasses on.

[LAUGHTER] [BACKGROUND MUSIC]

**Dr. Deborah Willis:**

"The serving girl can now see a likeness of herself, such as noble ladies and even royalty itself could not purchase 50 years ago. Formerly, the luxury of a likeness was the exclusive privilege of the rich and great, but now like education, and a thousand other blessings brought to us by the advancing march of civilization, such pictures are placed with an easy reach of the humblest members of society".

**Kim Sajat:**

You might say for all of the tragedy of the Civil War, it was the place where early photography found fertile soil and portraiture blossomed into something incredibly democratic. Now finally, people from all walks of life could control how they would be shown and seen.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

**Kim Sajet:**

A giant thanks to Dr. Rhea Combs and Dr. Deborah Willis for joining me and to Ann Shumard for a fact checking assist. Deb's latest book is called "The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship". You can see photographs of the man identified as Gordon and Peter, and many more Civil War soldiers in the show notes of this episode, or at our website [npg.si.edu/podcasts](http://npg.si.edu/podcasts). Ruth Morris produced this episode. Our podcast team also includes Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanon, Deborah Sisum, and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Our music is by Joe Kye and Breakmaster Cylinder, and our engineer is Tarek Fouda. Until next time, I'm your host, Kim Sajet.