

# FREEDOM ROAD PODCAST: EPISODE 18: TRANSCRIPT

## THE *ROOTS* OF U.S. EXPLOITATION OF IMMIGRANT LABOR – SLAVERY AND PEONAGE

This episode was published on July 3, 2019 as Part 1 of a 2-Part series. [Click here to listen to the series.](#) Transcription service was provided by L. Najuma Weeks

(Theme Music)

Coming to you from the road itself, I'm Lisa Sharon Harper, President of [Freedom Road](#), a consulting group dedicated to shrinking the narrative gap.

Welcome to the Freedom Road Podcast.



(Theme Music)

Each month we bring together national faith leaders, advocates and activists to have the kinds of conversations we normally have on the frontlines. And for the next two months we are coming to you from the road. We are on pilgrimage to understand the story of immigration, exploitation and labor in the U.S.

Over the course of the next two episodes, we will stand on the land where whips cracked backs - to bleed more work from black and brown bodies. We will stand in the literal valley of dry bones. A mass grave filled with the bodies of men and boys swept up in the post antebellum terror of peonage. We will speak with Faith Leaders pushing back against the exploitation of migrants and asylum seekers in America's detention system today.

(Music)

Now the thing about a pilgrimage is that it is different than a tour or a trip. Trips are all about the fun pictures you take to savor the memories you share and then tours are all about the

places you go to, to learn stuff. But pilgrimage is about the whole experience. Especially the in between times. The pilgrimage is about transformation. And transformation happens in the in between - on the road itself.

You will join us in the car, in our own conversations, in our processing and in our spiritual practices that help us hold the brokenness of our world.

(Music)

I called three friends to ask them to join me on pilgrimage. Sandra Ovalle serves as the Immigration Campaign Manager at Sojourners.

She and I will be conversation partners on the road. You may also hear from our Sound Engineer and Producer, David Dault, who will also serve as our driver part of the time. Hello! And thank you very much, David.

Alize' Jireh, our videographer, who comes to us from the Work of the People. The group helping us produce a corresponding forepart - film curriculum from the experience.

(Music)

In late 2013, I fasted on liquids at first and then only on water for twenty-two days with the [Fast for Families](#), a spiritual fast for immigration reform. It was the most spiritual experience of my life. The following year the Fast for Families charted two buses and embarked on a several month journey; stopping in towns across the country to encourage and equip immigrants and advocates to move congress to pass reform. I joined the bus tour towards the end—actually, in Richmond, Virginia. I also helped push it off in Los Angeles. [In Richmond], we got a call asking for one or two core fasters to drive out to Culpeper, Virginia to speak to a group of migrant workers there. Several of us piled into a car and drove for what felt like forever—to Culpeper. As we wound through country highways and back roads, we spotted along the roadside, Civil War markers—almost every hundred feet, it felt like. And this land, it was layered with memories. As we wound closer to the Lutheran Church, migrant workers sang songs of praise and worship in Spanish. And I remembered, in a flash, my mom once told me – we had ancestors in Culpepper before The Civil War. We don't know if they were enslaved or free. We don't know if they worked inside a master's home or fields, or if they worked their own land. All we know is they were of African descent in Virginia, before emancipation.

Whatever they did, their labor and its fruit were not compensated for their full value. They were exploited.

I stood before a packed room that spoke only Spanish. And shared with them, through an interpreter, that their fight is my fight. They are being exploited on the same land where my ancestors were exploited in the days of slavery. Both women and men wept. They understood.

(Music)

[The Whitney Plantation](#) Museum is one of the few plantation museums in the nation with an exclusive focus of the lives of enslaved people. We are joined by Executive Director, Ashley Rogers, and Director of Research, Dr. Ibrahima Seck.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Now, the colonization of Louisiana started in 1699, from Canada with the brothers Bienville and Iberville. But the real colonization, that's when you bring people to do the job.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: So, they started as indentured servants. They brought over here the first shipment – a few of enslaved people from the Caribbean in 1812. And the first Africans didn't come until 1819.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, but –

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: So, an indentured servant, is a white slave – so when you go to the part of Florida, and the part where you get on the boat you have to sign a contract that turns you into a slave for three years. You work for the company, and after three years, if you survive, they give you land. They may give you land and help you to get established. But for three years you are not free. And if the company doesn't need you, the company can sell you to a farmer, and you work for the farmer until the end of your engagement.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Wow.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: But like I told you earlier – it doesn't compare with enslaved Africans. By the numbers there were very, very few compared to Africans where they were brought over here by the thousands.

LISA SHARON HARPER: How many Africans were enslaved here by 1861, by the time of the start of the civil war?

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: But, at that time there were very few Africans, you know the international slave trade had stopped – was ended since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

LISA SHARON HARPER: OK.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: So, we still had Africans – like there was one African still living here, but they were no way in the majority. The majority came from the East Coast at that time.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Ahh –

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: From the East Coast of the United States.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Because of the domestic slave trade.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: But we know that when the French left here, there were about 6,000 slaves brought over here. Most of them from Senegambia. And for the 2,000 of Africans deported in slavery in Louisiana, I'd say about 22,000, was only between 1716 at the end of the French Regime. And in 1808 - 20,000 people were brought over here from Africa.

LISA SHARON HARPER: That makes sense actually, only the entire total Africans brought to the United States is only 400,000 in all of 256 years of slavery.

ASHLEY ROGERS: About 750,000<sup>1</sup>, but yeah, but yeah – but - um, I think he's speaking in terms of Africans. Yeah, that's different.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Africans – yeah. About 26,000 brought by the French.

ASHLEY ROGERS: But by 1861 the majority of people who were enslaved here in Louisiana would be multi-generational. Ah, people who were born here and whose parents and even grandparents had been born here. So, of course, across the entire United States, there were roughly four million enslaved people in 1861, and in Louisiana the population was somewhere north of 300,000 enslaved people – which is not all of the African descendant people. Right - that's different, because there were free people of color throughout the United States and here in Louisiana.

LISA SHARON HARPER: There was a large population of free people of African descent in Louisiana?

ASHLEY ROGERS: Yeah.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Um hmm.

ASHLEY ROGERS: Yeah Louisiana, yeah and in South Carolina, but Louisiana had one of the larger populations.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And South Carolina?

ASHLEY ROGERS: Oh Yeah.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, tell me why. Why there? Because I know that in Virginia and North Carolina - they passed laws that if you were born in Virginia after 1808 and you were free, you could not stay in Virginia. You had to leave. But if you were born in Virginia before 1808 then you could stay. That really weird. But that law -

ASHLEY ROGERS: I'm not familiar with that. So, North Carolina is my home state, and I know that they had a population of free people of color....um, so I'm not an expert on when all those different laws were passed. I will say that various laws restricted, um - let's say um - citizenship for free people of color. This is why the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment is important. Right. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment which establishes birthright citizenship is to establish once and for all that Black people can be citizens of this nation because, ah, various states throughout the nation were trying very hard to export or expel their African descendant people – um, or saying that they couldn't even come in the first place.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Ah huh.

ASHLEY ROGERS: Right. So, there were already problems with that. Um, and there were problems of all these formerly enslaved people: Do they get citizenship rights? And what are the qualifications for citizenship rights? What makes a citizen? And so, birthright citizenship is important in that respect. It's funny because birthright citizenship comes up again, with regard to immigration, right?

LISA SHARON HARPER: Explain.

ASHLEY ROGERS: Um, we—Now, people are questioning. Should we have birthright citizenship just because they're born here, and they bring up examples of other countries. But there's no need to look at other countries because we have to look at our own history and look at what we've done to people of color. And I think the answer is yes. We need birthright citizenship, of course. And we have a very strong precedent that we will try to remove citizenship rights from people of color if not. Right?

LISA SHARON HARPER: Um huh.

ASHLEY ROGERS: I have no doubt that if we create a situation where we create an idea that brown people coming from Central and South America don't get to be citizens, just because they weren't born here, what's to stop us from doing the same thing to African descendant people, the way we did in the past? Right?

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah,

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah, yeah.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: But, fortunately in 1857 they pass a law that – for the emancipation of Black people – um hum – they could not be emancipated anymore. And we see that that was a time that people petitioned the government. The local government of Louisiana – to be allowed to send their slaves abroad - like to Mexico. Mostly in the area of Vera Cruz.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Um hum.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Since they cannot be free here, so they petitioned to government to be allowed to send them. And of course, the people who do that – usually like they send their own concubines, their own children. Colored children—like one of them was of Master Haydel – one of the great-grandsons of the father of this plantation. He wrote a letter to the legislature of Louisiana asking permission to move his mulatto (*mulâtresse* in French) to move his children to Mexico.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, he had fathered seven children with an enslaved woman who he wanted to give manumission to by moving to Mexico?

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: and ASHLEY ROGERS: Um hum.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Yes. Because He could not free them here.

ASHLEY ROGERS: He could not free them here!

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, what did they do. Did they say yes or no?

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Yeah, they said yes. They leave. They left.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So now they are in Vera Cruz?

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: And there are many people who left Louisiana who go to that area of Vera Cruz. Which, I'm talking about a region of Vera Cruz. You have the capital of Vera Cruz, which is Tampico, which is a port city. And see a family name like, Fossa, and other family names you find here in Louisiana you find now in Vera Cruz. And now people are trying to petition, or maybe to sue the government to be allowed to come back to the United States.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And they're not considered citizens here.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: (Muse) Ah, no. No, they are Mexican. They are considered as Mexicans.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Wow.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Now there's a movement over there of people are fighting to get the rights to move back to the United States.

LISA SHARON HARPER: That's amazing, that amazing. I mean, another question I have, and this is for you Dr. Seck. What factors in Africa and Europe contributed to the rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in the first place?

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Money.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Money!

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: To make money.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Was it the wealthy trying to make more wealth? Was it in the midst of an economic downturn in Europe that caused them to go outward, and try to expand? Or, do you know that?

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: No. It was a realistic business. People were conquering land all around the world. If you want to conquer land and develop it—own it for your children, for your grandchildren, for the next generations, you need labor.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Mmm.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: That's quite simple.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, here's another question for you guys. Can we talk about the construct of race? I mean, I know that white supremacy, um, how did the institution of chattel slavery function to protect white supremacy?

ASHLEY ROGERS: Yes. So, slavery created the – what we have now, our inheritance, which is white supremacy. White supremacy does not exist unless you have an explicit racial hierarchy. And that racial hierarchy was built through the system of slavery – which is principally an economic labor system. And so, we have in this country a very clear divide, or a very clear idea of who people's ancestors were, who we imagine who their ancestors were, based on the color of their skin right now. Right?

LISA SHARON HARPER: Um hum.

ASHLEY ROGERS: We understand that if people have - if people are black in this country, even if it's not true – right? There are people in this country that do not have enslaved ancestors. But they none the less carry the mark of that. Right? Just the same that there are plenty of white people in this country that don't have slave owning ancestors.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right.

ASHLEY ROGERS: And yet, they carry not only the mark of it, but also the privileges associated with it.

LISA SHARON HARPER: The benefits of it.

ASHLEY ROGERS: The benefits of it!

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah.

ASHLEY ROGERS: Right. But slavery was, in this country, a racialized hierarchal labor system that created in our minds, an idea of who is the right color to do the right type of work.

(Music)

LISA SHARON HARPER: I mean – the creation of race. I mean I would be very interested to hear, in Africa, Senegal, where you're from – I mean before slavery, were categories for race?

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: No. We didn't even call it Africa.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Ahhh.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Africa is a foreign name. That's Arabic too. Africa was just a name for portion of Africa, which was Tunisia. They call it (inaudible) because they were decedents from another part of the continent

LISA SHARON HARPER: Because it was from the perspective of the Europeans.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: It's just a concept of, ah, Nit. I'm speaking Wolof now. "Nit" just means human being. That is the being that is lit, enlightened. You are not an animal. But I have a cousin, she says I'm a white person because I was educated by the white people. I went to their school. I lived in their country, and maybe mostly I behave like a European, that's why they call me a white person. So, it is. Race was created mostly in the framework of slavery. But race is just a tool. They manipulate it and justify to let people believe that these people are inferior, and they deserve to be enslaved. They were not uh, uh - between the end of chattel slavery and people being deported, and then colonized, you know. Africa was later conquered and became slave in their own country. They even went into a scientific basis for racism. They took old theories and they called it science. They even went and made fake skeletons to sustain their own theory of the evolution of mankind.

LISA SHARON HARPER: They made fake ones. I never knew that.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Yeah, they made fake ones, and buried it in the ground.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: And said, oh look what we found. Africa is not the cradle of mankind.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Wow!

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: They knew Africa is the cradle of mankind. All human beings came from Africa.

LISA SHARON HARPER: That's deep.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Religion came from out of Africa. But how can you call them a united people? And then they say, their rules of civilization are there.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Another narrative.

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: Yeah, and people still use it today. For their own business. So, I think white supremacy is rooted into slavery and colonizing.

LISA SHARON HARPER: What are the through lines of chattel slavery and the migrant worker system today? And the exploitation of migrant workers today?

DR. IBRAHIMA SECK: The similarity of both of them? They are exploited. Their labor is stolen from them. The slave doesn't get anything. They may get some little money for working on some days. And the migrant worker is deeply exploited. They give them just enough to survive.

(Music)

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(Music – Advertisement):

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(Music)

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, the thing that really struck me, (sound of slurp) in the midst of all of this, (laughs) that's a big slurp that you just took out of that water.

SANDY OVALLE: No, it sounded so much worse than what it was.

(laughter/banter)

SANDY OVALLE: I shocked myself.

LISA SHARON HARPER: You know what Dr. Seck was saying about laughter? It's like I feel like actually – it's uh - yeah, it's so overwhelming, you have to laugh in order – (To David) now that's the 10 freeway right there.

DAVID DAULT: (missing the turn) Aaaaaaagh ...

LISA SHARON HARPER: Holy Jesus. That was us. So, we're going to make a U turn up there, OK. Oh God (laughs) That's ok, we will do it. Alright, so... But what Dr. Seck said about laughter is - really true. Like, it's so deep that you need to take the valve out. You need to let the air out, otherwise you'll explode and... So that's real. But I'll tell you, one of the things that really hit me was that hearing Joy – Dr. Joy, the fact that she has – she still lives in the area, and her ancestors were on the same plantation. And now she works on that plantation in order to maintain and help people to understand slavery. It, struck me how different my experience is than those who have ancestors who stayed in the south. Because my ancestors; my grandmother, my great grandmother, literally are the ones who did it. They ran. They fled north. My great grandfather fled north from Kentucky and Indiana, and never went back. Didn't even talk about it. They wouldn't even talked about it. It was so bad. And so, so, as a result I am not connected to those roots in the same way that Joy is.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah, that was so surprising to see her still be in that and to be aware and conscious. Like I wonder how that story was passed down.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah... (sigh)

SANDY OVALLE: Like - what do you do to keep your family going. And living in the same situation knowing that your oppressors are only one block down.

LISA SHARON HARPER: They literally live – they live around the corner.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah – mmm.

LISA SHARON HARPER: I don't know how -

SANDY OVALLE: Survival mechanisms.

LISA SHARON HARPER : Yeah.

SANDY OVALLE: ...The work that you have to do, internally, to live through that.

LISA SHARON HARPER: But it also – I mean part of me was also really – and I mean, I don't want to make too much of it, because it wasn't the entire experience. But part of me was also really struck by the reality of, well – I, I - actually I want to stop, well – OK – I'll just say it, that because my ancestors migrated north, they actually have a sense of kinship in experience - with

the migrant workers, because there's a disconnection from the land that happens when you do that. Because you're no longer connected to the land and have a relationship with the land in the same way that Joy, and her family have a relationship with Wallace, Louisiana.

Sandy Ovalle: Sure.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right?

SANDY OVALLE: But I wonder also, if like being away from the land also allows you to have a different set of lenses. You know - because when you are away from the land like - kinda like - you know - a fish doesn't know that it's a fish until they're out of the water. And, so even being away, like I said - that people who are no longer in the lands where we they born - just gives you like a different panorama. You can become more critical - you can become - you can do some exploration of your own story in ways that when you're imbedded in it, it's harder, it's not impossible. But it's harder to do that.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah.

SANDY OVALLE: And so, I think that this is also why I was fascinated by Dr. Seck.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah -

SANDY OVALLE: ... who is a man from Senegal, which is where a lot of the people that were enslaved were brought from.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yes.

SANDY OVALLE: And he's now doing this here. Explaining here, but it is not his land. He's helping us understand. You know, it just kinda tells me ... I just find it fascinating that he, as an immigrant, is now helping us understand this story of people that are from here. And, not just an immigrant, but an immigrant with this connection back to where people came from. A person from that land, from where people were uprooted to be enslaved in the U.S. Now is here and has all this knowledge and ability to engage people. And it's someone who, himself, could have been one of them.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yes. It literally could have been him. Oh, but I have to say - the moment, the moment for me that literally led me to tears... Well, two moments led me to tears. One, was the children in the church and the children; the monument to the children. That did lead me to tears. Because there was something incredibly overwhelming; realizing that more than 2,000 children died.

SANDY OVALLE: Under the age of 2.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Under the age of 2. Within a 40-year period. Just a 40-year period, they chose randomly, in this parish. In this parish!

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah.

LISA SHARON HARPER: That says a lot about the conditions. (choking up) I mean think about it. If the child mortality rate was like that today, I mean – what we would say about that town. That parish. We would, you know –

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah—Close it down.

LISA SHARON HARPER: If it was white people – think about that. If it was white people who had that mortality rate in any town today, let's say Georgetown – Georgetown, Washington, DC. Or, you know, in Playa Vista, Los Angeles. If 2,000 white children died, within a 40-year period – in Playa Vista, before each reaching the age of 2, how would we respond? What would we think?

SANDY OVALLE: And, Lisa I would want to think that we would respond well. But it's like the reality of today. And I don't have the exact statistics. But I know that our mortality rates for undeveloped nation are really high.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah.

SANDY OVALLE: And that's very sad. And I wish we were doing more in those fronts. But I think the realities is also - I don't know. It's kinda like a weird dichotomy. Because, on the one hand, um, I feel as a non-American, that there is a great focus from – like particularly white families – that are very focused around their children

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah... Yeah... Yeah...

SANDY OVALLE: That everything ... and the protection is well with the children

LISA SHARON HARPER: Helicopter parents.

SANDY OVALLE: Yes.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yes. Yes.

SANDY OVALLE: And on the other hand, there are, you know, children in cages, or children detained in homes today, that are away from their parents, that have no access to medical care. They have no access to legal representation, to education, to mental health care, etc., or to their families.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And how many children have we already have had die in cages? In detention. At our Southern Border today. As in the last 1 year, not 40 years. In the last 1 year.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah. In the last few months.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Few months.

SANDY OVALLE: Like, since December, I think, like it's been – when we start counting - 6 children that we know of ...

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah.

SANDY OVALLE: And most of them are, actually, indigenous Guatemalan. Like, five of them are indigenous Guatemalan children, which tend to be people who are connected to the land; people who are working and working their lands back in their home countries. People, who can no longer sustain their lands, because as we've exploited the earth, um, and produced climate change, their land cannot produce anymore. So, they can't feed their families and find themselves here. So, I would want to think that as we see how people are dying that we would respond and that our nation would do something specifically for children. But I think we are not. Like, children are in detention today, and we don't do much about it.

LISA SHARON HARPER: We don't do much.

LISA SHARON HARPER: But I think if they were white children, they would. If they were little English children, little British children—come on now. If they were little Irish children... If they were little white children, people wouldn't only cry. It would not happen.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah.

LISA SHARON HARPER: But, because they're little brown children – it really goes back to what Ashley, Dr. Ashley, was saying; that it's the hierarchy—what I often call the hierarchy of human belonging.<sup>2</sup> And [it's about] what she was talking about; that racial hierarchy is needed in order to enforce the economic system that depends on free labor and low-cost labor. And, when you talk about a hierarchy of human belonging; brown people have been cast in the role of those who are expendable—those who suffer, those who are not really fully human—for the sake of the economy—white people's economy.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, we don't cry. (choked up). We don't cry when brown children die in detention.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Wow.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah. It's devastating it's the – it's the sense of their being only as good as long as it serves them. The system – as long as it serves the preservation of people that look like me. You know.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Mmm.

SANDY OVALLE: You know. So,

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah.

SANDY OVALLE: They're expendable. It's the oppression of the image of God. Right? Like the image of God didn't quite reach them.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah, didn't quite transfer there.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Wow. You know another piece - another time, a moment that really struck me - so, there were two. There was the children. The second one was when we were standing at the wall of the names of the people that lived on the plantation and there was Samba. And I asked [Dr. Seck]—because he was saying that Samba was a man's name, in Senegal. Yeah, in Senegal. And, um - and I think it means "first born"?

SANDY OVALLE: Second born.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yes. It means second born. Thank you. And when I asked him: "Well, would there be a *Sambo*?" He says "Yes. You know a little further inland, if you go closer to this group, it would have been *Sambo*." This is actually in my next book, but the reality is the earliest African that our family can trace—and of course it needs to be confirmed, but as far as we can see—we trace back to a man named *Sambo*. And, I've never known exactly where he was from. In some of my reading at one point - it said that the original people from - ah - that came into the Eastern Shore of Maryland were from Benin. And then another thing that I read said Senegambia. And now I realize that Senegambia, is basically Senegal. But it's the - what did he say it was - it was the English word for that? Um, yeah - and Senegal is the Arabic word. And so, but he said that *Sambo* was an actual name there. I, that literally - I felt like I met my ancestor for the very first time. Like really met him. Because I always thought he was *named* *Sambo*, when he got here. Because - that's not an African name. But it is! That was his name. He had his name. It's still kind of settling in. That was his name. They didn't rename him. But it was so early in the system maybe they didn't even think to do that. They weren't trying to break them so much then, as they started doing in 1700's - because he got here in the 1680's. My God!

SANDY OVALLE: Powerful. It's like you met a cousin.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah... yeah.

SANDY OVALLE: Yeah. It's so incredible. I love how he um - was saying um - about how all of this is hidden - hidden history. Hidden history is what keeps us from fully, um, being who we are—fully liberated. Fully engaging. And so, um I'm just been looking around as we're driving and seeing like - just how beautiful this place looks -

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah.

SANDY OVALLE: And how, like - why is there like not a marker? Like here's where it happened. Here's where the people died.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yes.

SANDY OVALLE: Here's where the people were taken. Here's the wheel. He was describing the scene of the punishment.

LISA SHARON HARPER: The wheel!

SANDY OVALLE: And describing if an enslaved person ran away –

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yes –

SANDY OVALLE: ... for the first time. Their ears would be cut. And if they run away a second time, they'd be branded - right. And the second time they'd cut in the thigh – and um, and so on. And the third time they would be punished by death. And there would be like these wheels where it would be like all of their limbs—I'm sorry for being so graphic—chopped off or broken.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And broke. Every single bone broken.

SANDY OVALLE: Um huh. And then they would be left to bleed. And die as a public scene. And as I'm picturing this – like why is there not a marker that signals - that it just all seems like – you look around and it's just beautiful green grass and trees and um to me – it's just part of like - I mean - I would put a huge sign that says never again.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yes –

SANDY OVALLE: Here's where the people died. I'm like really surprised. Like I don't see – I mean it just ... (muses)

(Music)

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, one thing that really strikes me about this area is the water. And, also the trees. The trees just shoot kinda straight out of the ground and it's so thick. And one of the – one of the things that, it's – it's making my childhood vision of my ancestors come to life in a way that has never done before. Because, we're literally rolling through the land where these songs my mom used to sing – came from. The slave spirituals. Like, *Wade In the Water*. So right next to us is a swamp that's been going the entire length of the road that we're driving. And that was the place where runaway slaves would go. And - They would literally go under the water in order to not be seen. And, also go under the water to not have the dogs pick up their scent. They would lose their scent they went into the water. They couldn't be tracked anymore. So, the waterways were, actually, the path to freedom. And my mom used to sing me to sleep every night – singing *Wade in the Water*.

(sings) *Wade in the water, wade in the water children, wade in the water God's gonna trouble the water. Wade in the water, wade in the water children, wade in the water God's gonna trouble the wa - ter.*

(Music)

On Freedom Road, from coast to coast and around the globe, this is the Freedom Road Podcast.

(Music)

(Advertisement – “Thinking Cap Podcast”)

(Music)

LISA SHARON HARPER: [Sugar Land, Texas is home to a revelation](#). In the years following the Civil War, Congress passed the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments, abolishing slavery, establishing birthright citizenship and establishing the right of every male citizen to vote. These reconstruction Amendments presented a great threat to the already devastated southern agrarian economy which relied on the free labor of the more than 4 million enslaved men women and children before the war. The reconstruction Amendments also presented an existential challenge to the idea of white supremacy. An idea that had been embedded in the constitution through the three fifths compromise. Embedded in The Immigrant Act of 1790 to the declaration that only white men can become naturalized citizens. And to the through judicial law, such as the Dred Scott decision which declared that a free black man has no rights that a white man need abide. White supremacy was the air America breathed before reconstruction. Now, afterwards, the air was being sucked out of the white supremacist south. In response, Southern legislatures crafted a web of race codes that criminalized blackness and directed streams of black boys and men back into the very plantations, from which they had just been freed. The scheme was called [Peonage](#).

(Music)

LISA SHARON HARPER: Mr. Reginald Moore is the founder of the [Convict Leasing and Labor Project](#), based in Sugar Land, Texas.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Can you explain the Sugar Land Convict Lease System? What was it?

REGINALD MOORE: The convict lease system was what the state, the federal – the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment said you were free unless convicted of a crime. That came about December the 5<sup>th</sup>, 1865 – after the Juneteenth, here in Texas. In 1865, when the Blacks got – they were the last ones to hear it here in Texas – two years after they had been freed.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Wow.

REGINALD MOORE: And then six months later the government to appease the southerners, passed the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, that said you were free unless convicted of a crime – or something. Then January of 1866, the state of Texas legislated it into law here. So federal law was legislated into state law. So that's what we have here.

LISA SHARON HARPER: What was the law? What did the law say?

REGINALD MOORE: The law say you free unless you was convicted of a crime; you go back into servitude.

LISA SHARON HARPER: I see. So, they codified the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment into the state law.

REGINALD MOORE: Um hmm. Right. And you can get it word for word off of our website.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, on the way over here, one of the things that you pointed out to us – was the original prison building. The convict leasing building. And you said that, I think it was just the one – it was built in 1888. Is that right?

REGINALD MOORE: 1886. Right.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Eighteen eighty-six.

REGINALD MOORE: Right.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So right after Peonage started – convict leasing started. It like kind of, literally would be within 10 years – within 9 years of the end of reconstruction.

REGINALD MOORE: Correct.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Liz Peterson is a Board Member with the Convict Leasing Project. She and Suzette Montgomery, Communications Director of the Convict Leasing and Labor Project, came along with us, as we wound our way through Sugar Land.

LIZ PETERSON: That's what our organization has been all about; making sure that the history of convict leasing in Sugar Land and Fort Bend County is told, because the temptation is to sanitize it for everybody's comfort and convenience. Maybe now we'll actually acknowledge that it happened, which is a step in the right direction. But at the Convict Leasing and Labor Project we want to make sure that people know what really happened on these plantations – what these men and boys really went through. All of America needs to learn this, so that we don't repeat these same mistakes.

REGINALD MOORE: We're passing the street leaving from the house going up to the site ... And we just passed the street called Plantation Valley – just one light – one block from the subdivision - and how they're still glamourizing all these plantation names, and names that happened during the Antebellum period. You know Sienna Plantation, Plantation Grove, and all these different

names of streets and subdivisions – they’re glamorizing it to this day. They’re not remorseful of it, cause they are still advocating for it through street names, monuments and memorials.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And so, you were saying that this is the main road in Sugar Land that we’re on?

REGINALD MOORE: Yeah,

LISA SHARON HARPER: And, so on this main road we have Old Richmond, we have Panhandle Drive. We have Plantation Row – Plantation ...

REGINALD MOORE: Valley.

LISA SHARON HARPER: We have Plantation Valley. My goodness.

REGINALD MOORE: Now we’re driving about three for four miles from the sugar mill and then you’ll be coming to another subdivision where the name uh – some of them are named after plantations.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, what you’re saying is that – just to be clear – your saying that - where all of these workcamps were, are now subdivisions built on top of what used to be workcamps and prisons?

REGINALD MOORE: Exactly.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Like, people’s homes?

LIZ PETERSON: Like, the University of Houston at Sugar Land is built on top of what we believe to have been a camp. And we suspect there may have been bodies buried there, but we haven’t been able to investigate that.

REGINALD MOORE: And wherever there’s a camp there’s a cemetery – just like where the cemetery of the 95 was. There’s a camp here called the Ellis 1 Camp. And, so we had other camps around here. Wherever the camps were – there were called burial sites. Now we come – this here is the side – this is the side where the white side lived at, ok - called the Hill. On the other side here right here behind us - was a Black area called—the slave quarters—called May Field Park. This here is – this here is the sugar mill. See that over there that building there?

LISA SHARON HARPER: Oh wow.

REGINALD MOORE: See these street [art] pieces – someone put that there for the time - and they gonna talk about that all the time, but they still don’t talk about the convict lease system.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Wait -

REGINALD MOORE: On that right here – on that bridge where you see all that art?

Lisa Sharon Harper Yes.

REGINALD MOORE: They don't talk about the convict lease system – but they talk about how the slaves built it. But they don't mention the convict lease system at all.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Oh wow.

REGINALD MOORE: Ok. And, so this is a hidden history that people don't wanna hear - and they want to erase this history and rebrand it in a different way, instead of telling the history that happened.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And I just wanna say that we're driving past a lots signs that say Imperial.

REGINALD MOORE: Imperial. This was Imperial Sugar. Imperial Sugar is a company that came around in – uh - and it was named in the 1800's. But, the Kemplers bought this here from Cunningham and Ellis. And they named this here, Imperial Sugar. The named this here Imperial Sugar.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, the workcamp was a sugar mill?

REGINALD MOORE: Exactly.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, people were leased to work in a sugar mill?

REGINALD MOORE: In sugar mill and other mills throughout this area and in the four county the region. And that's some of the pot – that what they used to use to make the ...

LISA SHARON HARPER: We saw that pot on the Whitney Plantation.

REGINALD MOORE: Exactly. That's what they used to use –

LISA SHARON HARPER: Uh – in slavery? That exact same pot is what they used to use - uh- in slavery.

REGINALD MOORE: Exactly. This area right here is called Mayfield Park.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Uh huh -

LIZ PETERSON: This is the quarters?

REGINALD MOORE: The old plantations became prisons, and the old plantation owners became wardens. After slavery system was over, that's when they created that new slavery system out of that 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. And that's how they became – Cunningham and Ellis. They were all old plantation owners. That they became wardens of the whole criminal justice systems.

SUZZETTE MONTGOMERY: Well, 'cause like - when I look at the prison systems. The most glaring resemblance to slavery – would be Angola in Louisiana? Their big state prison? There are documentaries; most people who have to go there get 25 years minimum.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah.

SUZETTE MONTGOMERY: And, what happens; they don't even have fences out because this is 30 miles from civilization. They say you can run if you want to. You're not going to go anywhere.

REGINALD MOORE: Angola was named after Angola, Africa.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right.

REGINALD MOORE: And uh, in Texas, we used to be told they are self-sufficient here. That's the [Ellis] 1 camp prison – right there, ok. And, see right here where the trees are that's where the warden's house was. And they used to come up under the bridge. That's where they warden's house used to be – that white house – that's where they tore down. That's central unit. Right there.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Central unit is a white apartment building, where a bunch of people – it looks like an apartment building from far away. But it was a prison?

REGINALD MOORE: Yeah, that was a prison. And that's where the cemetery is at – behind those trees –

LISA SHARON HARPER: And it's in a huge field.

REGINALD MOORE: Right.

LISA SHARON HARPER: With a bunch of trees and train tracks running across.

REGINALD MOORE: Mmm hmm. And that when Ledbetter wrote that song – Midnight train – the train they used to come through and drop the prisoners off. Now see that plantation row of trees – that's how you can get to this prison right here.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Oh my God.

REGINALD MOORE: This central prison – right here.

LISA SHARON HARPER: They have a plantation row of trees. That – like - they have the iconic picture of the trees of that line the path into a plantation. That's how you get to the prison – is through a line of trees, so it looks beautiful.

REGINALD MOORE: Right.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Oh, my God.

REGINALD MOORE: Right. See the prisoners here didn't integrate here until 1968. Yeah, they were segregated. They had the white prisoners over here and they had the Blacks at the black prison building, which I'll show y'all when we leave here.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, the white prisoners went through the line of trees that looked beautiful?

REGINALD MOORE: Right.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And then the black prisoners?

REGINALD MOORE: ... had another camp called the Colored 2 Camp. And the last camp they had over here was segregated. This year Sugar Land Heritage Society honored Ellis, who was part of Cunningham and Ellis – uh – who had the first original – uh - working successful contract with the state leasing, convict leasing. And Eldridge who owned – who was a plantation owner – who farmed the Imperial Sugar with Mr. Kemptler. And, uh - they made a commemorative Christmas ornament named after Ellis and Eldridge. And this was 2018. Glorifying and honoring them, when they heavily influenced and created the convict leasing system ...

LISA SHARON HARPER: So the Imperial Sugar - established the convict lease system through the two men that were commemorated on the ornament? Did I get that right?

REGINALD MOORE: Well, uh – the convict lease system was already established through Ellis and Cunningham –

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, Ellis and –

REGINALD MOORE: ... uh then Ellis and Eldredge got together, then they worked that land for a while uh – through that lease that they had.

SUZZETTE MONTGOMERY: So, the distribution of the commemorative ornament, is really symbolic of how the city of Sugar Land was treating the discovery of the Sugar Land 95. They were paying lip service to the fact that it was a historical find – a historical discovery. But they just couldn't appreciate the magnitude and the meaning behind what these folks endured. And, what Mr. Moore has been instrumental in doing in the convict leasing and labor project, is making sure that this doesn't get a five minute – gee – we're so sorry this happened. And move on with our lives. But it becomes an integral part of Fort Bend county history and – you know, it's not taught in Texas schools right now. It's not taught anywhere in the nation – pretty much. Unless you're a history major in college, and people don't really understand, when we say convict leasing – they think – well if you don't want to do the time, don't do the crime.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right.

SUZZETTE MONTGOMERY: And, what they don't understand is that – well, for one thing, the completely - the complete dehumanization of these individuals, working them to absolute death, to extract the maximum profit. But also, the fact that most of them had not done any crimes, or the crime they'd done was so insignificant, or even made up – that they didn't get fair trials. They didn't get any trials to speak of – and their main guilt – was being a pretty strong looking young black man who could work the sugar fields and the refinery.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Or Black boys - actually.

SUZZETTE MONTGOMERY: Absolutely. Black boys.

LISA SHARON HARPER: The majority of them in there were Black boys.

SUZZETTE MONTGOMERY: Teenagers – umm hmm.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Yeah, But they – some of them as young as 11. Eleven years old, ten years old.

REGINALD MOORE: Mmm hmm. They had one in there that was 14, but they had an 11-year-old. But you know they had a juvenile farm. And they worked them too. This place they treated them so bad; they deemed this “The Hellhole on the Brazos,” because of the atrocities and the way they were treated. Nobody wanted to come here because of the horrible conditions, and they called this “The Hellhole on the Brazos.”

LISA SHARON HARPER: On the Brazos?

REGINALD MOORE: On the Brazos. Brazos, because of the Brazos River. It was right up the street. That’s where it was.

(Music)

REGINALD MOORE: We got approximately 31 to 33 graves in here. The earliest grave we have are from 1912. But I would - would really say and believe, that a few of these guys in here was part of the convict leasing system, although the convict lease system, was over when they put ‘em although they put in this particular cemetery—the one with the Sugar Land 95—the latest bodies we have in there is 1910. Uh—so—

LISA SHARON HARPER: So before –

REGINALD MOORE: I would imagine some of these guys that were in this cemetery were – was still in slavery – was still in the convict lease system - because they were in here probably were in her before 1910. Cunningham and Ellis owned this particular land and area of 50 some thousand acres they had accumulated after the other plantation owners got into a destitute situation. They accumulated a lot of properties, that’s when they got an agreement with the state to lease out the whole penal system, since they didn’t have nowhere to house them other than in the Huntsville units which was – uh – which was the administrative building. So, they didn’t have any other – but these guys had land compared to the first lessees, who didn’t have their own land. So, they leased out the whole prison farm. And – uh - that’s where we are today - standing on part of the property that Cunningham and Ellis – uh - them leased out.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, what did the men do here – what was their work that they were leased out to do?

REGINALD MOORE: Well, in that time – during in the 1800's it was -uh – sugar cane. It was sugar cane. And, that's what would feed these sugar mills – and all that – and sugar cane was king. And they had four counties that participated in that.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And how many men do you know – how many men were swept up into convict leasing?

REGINALD MOORE: Well, we don't know. It probably run into uh – thinking there were about 3,500 that died. So, I imagine that there were about 30-40 thousand, in my estimate, that probably ran through this convict lease system...

LISA SHARON HARPER: In Texas?

REGINALD MOORE: ... over a period of 1878 all the way up until about 1910. So, I would imagine that many.

LISA SHARON HARPER: And you're talking about Texas, in particular?

REGINALD MOORE: Just in Texas.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Just in Texas. Wow.

REGINALD MOORE: Thirty-five hundred, we know, probably - that died. That's accounted for.

LISA SHARON HARPER: How many do you imagine – actually, went through that system?

REGINALD MOORE: Probably about 30,000

LISA SHARON HARPER: I just want to make sure I heard that right.

REGINALD MOORE: Right.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Oh, my goodness. And so, can you tell the story about the moment you realized there were bones under the soil, or – might be?

REGINALD MOORE: Well, they did an archeological – sent archaeologist out here, that I recommended, once I held them accountable that – that they had to do laws - preservation laws according to the state, which they were moving forward without doing the archeological studies – when I made them aware that they didn't want to hear it. But I got the state got involved, and the state made them do the archeological studies.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So why would you do it? Why you...

REGINALD MOORE: Well, I was a guardian here in the cemetery for about 9 or 10 years and – uh – so I been watching and understanding what was going on. And before the guardian – I was trying to get them reparations when I knew that this had been a prison site – and a (inaudible) where the convict leasing system had been involved here, that I wanted to get them some type of restitution – reparation. And, so I was fighting for that when the state was getting ready to sell

this land. And so, I followed it from the state to the sale of the land - to the sale of city Sugar Land. And I kept following it over the years until this new development sold this piece of land to the Fort Bend independent school district.

LISA SHARON HARPER: So, you used to be a prison correctional officer?

REGINALD MOORE: Correct.

LISA SHARON HARPER: On this land?

REGINALD MOORE: That's correct. Right up the road where the at the Jester Unit, which is all encompassed and owned by the state and (inaudible) Ellis but I was at the Jester Unit.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right. And it was while you were there -

REGINALD MOORE: I was at the (inaudible) plantation.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right. It was there that you began to think. Something's not right here. There's probably people – like under the ground.

REGINALD MOORE: Right. It was probably - I had a vision that there was something not right. But I didn't know where to look until 2001.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Uh huh.

REGINALD MOORE: And, when they went to sell this land, I went to Alston, and I found out the history of that old Flanagan house, which was a warden's house – where the guy Ledbetter sung his way out. That's when I found out about the land what everything that had transpired on it.

LISA SHARON HARPER: In Slavery By Another Name by Dennis Blackman, he says that Peonage was a system of terror and brutality develop to continue uphold the Southern economic structure. So, Mr. Moore, what terror took place here in Sugar Land? How were they terrorized?

REGINALD MOORE: They were terrorized because they were victimized. They were treated inhumanely.

LISA SHARON HARPER: How - in what ways?

REGINALD MOORE: As far as working them to death, working them without proper food. Without proper clothing. Without proper sleeping accommodations. There were beatings - torture for not getting the quantity of cotton or sugar cane – the cane that they were supposed to be getting. So, they just treated and beat and worked them – you know - beyond limits that were considered humane.

LISA SHARON HARPER: You said something early in our conversations about the men being expendable. Can you explain that? Why were they expendable?

REGINALD MOORE: Because they had a steady flow of labor that was coming through the jail system that ended up going into the prison system – where they could pick up people on all type of trumped up charges – vagrancy charge. Ah – they had a pig law - you got caught stealing a wild pig – you could get 15 years – similar to the crack laws in the sentencing disparity. That’s what kinda got me interested. They knew that they could have a ready force of individuals that they could penalize and victimize to put them into the system – so they could work out crimes or fines that they were putting on them. So, they had a steady flow of individuals coming through here that were expendable; compared to during slavery, when they considered them property [and] they had a vested interest in the individual. This time they didn’t.

LISA SHARON HARPER: Right.

REGINALD MOORE: So, they could work them to death and treat them like they wanted. And if they died, well they could just go on and call for another one. So, they were expendable.

LISA SHARON HARPER: How did the men and boys survive? Do you know? Do you have a sense of what were their mechanisms or their practices of resistance?

REGINALD MOORE: Well, some of them would cut they foot off. Or cut a finger off or gauge their eyes out. Or cut the Achilles tendons in their legs so they wouldn’t be fit to work. And they called this area The Hellhole on the Brazos. People said they’d rather work inside, or go anywhere but here in Texas, and die here in Sugar Land to work...because the mortality rate here was 3-5 years of work and working in those conditions till you were either dead or unfit to work, because of the conditions you were put up under. So, they did a lot of things like that to try to get from having to come to the fields...

LISA SHARON HARPER: My God.

REGINALD MOORE: Sometimes it was self-mutilation.

LISA SHARON HARPER: That’s very similar to slavery, actually, that was some of the resistance mechanisms that they used then.

REGINALD MOORE: I call it “slavery by a new name.” Douglas Blackmon calls it “slavery by another name,” I call it “slavery by a new name.” And it was a form of slavery. It was worse than slavery.

LISA SHARON HARPER: ... What is the lesson of Sugar Land for you?

REGINALD MOORE: Well the lesson is that a lot of people profited and a lot of people who profited off the ones who were exploited were not recognized. They should be vindicated. But, a lot of them who they were saying were criminals were actually free people who were put into criminal situations. ... So, they should be recognized. There should be a memorial. There should be a museum. They should put up monuments to explain what happened after The Civil War.

(Music)

LISA SHARON HARPER: The thing that strikes me is how deep this evil goes. There is such a thing as a spiritual lie. It occurs to me that principle lie of slavery and peonage, is that black and brown bodies exist to maintain the comfort of white ones. Period. This is a lie from the pit of hell. And Sugar Land has revealed one place of many where peonage was established, where hell came up to play on earth. There really are no words to hold this evil. So, those of African descent on this pilgrimage will perform a ritual that was handed down to us by our ancestors. We will pour libations on the earth where the bodies of the men were buried. On the very land where they dropped.

(sound of water - pouring libations)

LISA SHARON HARPER: We speak words to you that you never got to hear in the last moments in this life. We see you. We love you. We honor you. In commemoration of the dead, we offer a moment of silence.

(silence)

LISA SHARON HARPER: Walking forward on the road to justice, this is the Freedom Road Podcast.

(Theme Music)

LISA SHARON HARPER: Thank you for joining us today. This Freedom Road Podcast Episode was recorded onsite, at the Whitney Plantation in Edgar Louisiana and in Sugar Land, Texas – in partnership with Sojourners and The Work of the People. This episode was edited and engineered by David Dault, of Sandberg Media. Freedom Road Podcast is produced by Freedom Road, LLC. We consult, coach, train and design experiences that bring common understanding, common commitment and lead to common action. You can find out more about our work at our website – [www.freedomroad.us](http://www.freedomroad.us). Stay in the know by signing up for updates. We really do promise we won't flood your inbox. We invite you to listen again next month when we continue our pilgrimage through the story of immigration and exploitation in San Antonio at the border in Mc Allen, Texas. New Episodes drop around the first day of the month. Join us on Freedom Road.

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<sup>1</sup> Post-production, Ashely Rogers corrected this number via email on July 6, 2019. Rogers agreed that approximately 400,000 Africans were brought to the U.S. in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper first heard the language “Hierarchy of Human Belonging” in a presentation by Dr. Gail Christopher on the social construct of race, circa 2013.