EMILY BINGHAM INTERVIEW
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Emily Bingham
Historian and Author
Interviewed by Nancy Steiner
Date of Interview:
Total Running Time: 55 minutes and 28 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Story Features

Kunhardt Film Foundation

NANCY STEINER:

May we please have quiet on the set?

CREW:

All great. Let's roll camera and roll sound.

CREW:

Camera speeds.

CREW:

Emily Bingham interview take one, marker. And give me one second to clear.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Emily Bingham
Historian and Author

Emily Bingham
Historian and Author

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NANCY STEINER:
"My Old Kentucky Home" is a song that is practically an anthem for people. It takes them to a very, I want you to sort give us 'My Old Kentucky Home' for Dummies. Right? Okay. And take us to what the power is of this song. And then how you came to discover the truth.

EMILY BINGHAM:
"My Old Kentucky Home", the song, takes people to a place of happiness. That is the effect of it for most people who hear it today. It's sweet, it's longing, it maybe evokes home sickness. And the contrast of those evoked emotions, those feelings, with the content of the original song is so extraordinary that it is shocking. It is shocking that those feelings are being evoked by a song that is about a man being torn from his family, sold for cash because of the color of his skin, as hundreds of thousands of people were.

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EMILY BINGHAM:
And dying alone, still thinking of that family back in Kentucky, and wishing himself back into slavery with them. Everything about it is both tragic and

absurd. And yet it has this extremely dramatic effect on people, such that I can read obituaries every week of the year saying, so and so had "My Old Kentucky Home" played at their funeral. So and so never heard "My Old Kentucky Home" with a dry eye. And these are, I'm telling you, white people. Because it is one of the ways, and I believe this is so important, one of the invisible ways that a white supremacist, dehumanizing culture gives satisfaction to the people who are doing the dehumanization. The group that is doing that.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Even without them knowing it. And that getting underneath it, and my discovery that this is what it really was, and that it really was doing harm. That there were people who instead of standing up and weeping at the song, were sitting down and saying, "This is not our song. And what would it mean if my state anthem, or this thing in front of millions of people at the Kentucky Derby, weren't taking me back to a time when I was owned? What if?" But no one was hearing them. And I hadn't heard them. And I hadn't noticed. So what else is going on here? Isn't this just one of the many things that we do because we don't know? Because systems have institutions like Churchill Downs, or the state of Kentucky, or the school you go to, have taught you that this is a warm and fuzzy thing to be proud about.

NANCY STEINER:

How'd you figure it out? How'd you come to this?

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EMILY BINGHAM:

So it was literally one day in advance of the spring. The first Saturday in May, when my town, Louisville, turns into Derby City, that I was preparing to host people to come from somewhere else, stay in my house and go see this horse race. And I thought, you know, I've always told people about the derby hats. Bring a hat if you want to. That you're going to drink this syrupy thing called a mint julep, and it's just wonderful. And that we're going to sing this song. And I thought, well, I don't really know what it's about. I did have an inkling it might be sort of racial, maybe. Because as a child, that old slur was still in sort of haunting the song. But I didn't know that it was about slavery. And that when I read this story, that is a narrative of tearing a family apart, one of the most grievous offenses that this country has ever committed. And it did it so many times. And has never apologized for it either.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

That realization made me think, “Oh, I'm a historian here. I'm supposed to tell my friends to stand up and do this. Wait.” And it just sat with me as this burden. Like nobody is talking about this.

NANCY STEINER:

And what propelled you to write the book?

EMILY BINGHAM:

I made that realization about what the song was in its origins. And indisputably, there's just no getting around it. That it was a blackface minstrel

tune. That it was used for entertainment. That it was probably part of a system of forgetting that this country wanted to give itself, this white leadership wanted to give itself. But I don't write a book lightly. And it was really only after years and years of my own grappling with continuing to see it everywhere, whether it's on a throw pillow in somebody's house, that someone gave them when they moved in.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Or on a necklace. Or in the glassware that people are drinking out of, “My Old Kentucky Home.” It wouldn't go away. And it was a burr under my saddle. So it grew increasingly uncomfortable. The thing that maybe tipped me over the edge was when I gave a brief talk about it, and a Black friend came up to me afterward and she said, "Emily, you know now why this song is so bad. You know that it harms other people. How do people love it so much?" And that was the question I had to get to. How could something that is harmful be so beloved?

NANCY STEINER:

Can you explain for me why a book connecting 200 years of American racism to an iconic American song written about 150 years ago holds real meaning in today’s world?

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EMILY BINGHAM:

What makes an old, old song relevant still today is exactly that. That it does connect the ups and downs and yet constancy of white supremacist thinking

through entertainment, through fantasies of actually helping other people, which was always a fantasy. Through tourism, through marketing, fried chicken and so, so much more. Um, through our most beloved and most anciently revered sporting event, the Kentucky Derby. And all the way to the bullets at Breonna Taylor's door that hit in 2020.

NANCY STEINER:
How would you make that connection?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
So "My Old Kentucky Home" is a song written by a Pittsburgher, named Steven Foster. And the first thing I like to make sure I emphasize is that this isn't a southern thing and it's not a Kentucky thing. This is about our entire nation and how it has and hasn't addressed our own past. This one song starts with my, something intimate and personal, old, something comforting, and from the past. Kentucky, which is actually exotic and kind of strange to many people, and then this universal home that we all want, long for, wish for, imagine, from the past, or into the future. And that vehicle is like a car that can navigate through and carry what I argue, white people's need to forget and feel forgiven for the past through all kinds of aspects of life.

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EMILY BINGHAM:
And the most, starting with Steven Foster, his really appalling achievement. And he was a very skilled songwriter and a courageous one, trying to make a living at a time when that was an almost impossibility, to make a living

writing songs. But he was able to soften the edges of one of the most fundamental aspects of American culture, blackface minstrelsy, so that it could survive and thrive in so many other settings like the ones I just mentioned.

NANCY STEINER:
So it matters now because…

EMILY BINGHAM:
Because it hasn't gone away. I mean, the song hasn't gone away. The feelings of uplift that it gives people who hear it and who sing it together. It's one of the only songs sung in mass in our country today. So you have 'Take Me Out To The Ballgame'.

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EMILY BINGHAM:
You have the national anthem and then you have in front of 150,000 plus people every year for an international, as well as national audience at a horse race. “My Old Kentucky Home,” where people stand up and many of them get tears in their eyes, but they don't know— and what makes it, I think, especially relevant today is so many of the people who are having those emotions and that sense of excitement and uplift are people who have the culture has helped them forget that that song is about slavery. It is about the slave trade. And they don't realize that they are having all these feelings on that because over time, that was permitted.

NANCY STEINER:

What can you tell us that you learned about the past that you still see existing now?

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EMILY BINGHAM:

I think we want in this country very badly to feel that we are one exceptional, right? Different from other countries, other cultures. The city on the hill, right? Also, we want to think that we are constantly progressing. And one of the big reveals for me in this, well one, we are not exceptional. There are caste and racial hatred and ethnic hatreds throughout the world, and we are no exception. But, in terms of our progress, this is something that I grew up with very close to my heart. I grew up in a very liberal, for the place and time, media family in Kentucky where we were persuaded and I was told every day that we were crusading for good, for truth, for a better world, a fairer world, and a less corrupt world. And that it was getting better all the time, just like that wonderful song.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

So I think that the fact of looking at "My Old Kentucky Home," which threaded through my great-grandfather's life, and I can come back to him, to my grandfather, my own father who heard this song in Japan, sung by the victims of American bombings, to my own life where I was also singing about slavery unknowingly and having warm and fuzzy feelings. There's so many ways that while things have changed, we haven't finished, we haven't progressed. And the dreams of liberal sort of… That we are doing a little better all the time

just by being better ourselves as individuals, has left aside the systemic repetitions and reformulations that this song can help us see, I think, as it morphs through the culture.

NANCY STEINER:
So you sort of see it as a looking glass or a lens?

EMILY BINGHAM:
Yeah.
NANCY STEINER:
And in your own experience with this song, you were brought to tears?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
Yeah, and that was in writing about it. I wrote a whole book called, *My Old Kentucky Home*. I had to reckon with myself through the book and I'm a historian. I normally rely, I do rely primarily on archives, on interviews, on gathering data to try to patch together something about… That can tell us a story about the past that helps us make sense. But in this case, I realized if I didn't admit to the readers that I was part of that flow of thoughtless white supremacy, that it would be extremely like that was just going to be the epitome of dishonesty. So I am a historian, again, I write this as a history, but I was going to the Kentucky Derby. I was telling everybody like, "Oh, this is just a nice tradition. We all do."

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EMILY BINGHAM:

I was crying. I was— Then when I did find out what the song was about and read that, it was about an enslaved man being sold from a happy Kentucky home down the river to die in a sugar cane field, never to see his family again. That the "lady" he was singing to wasn't someone who looked like me, but because it's blackface minstrelsy, it was a joke. He was singing to his own lady. And there were no ladies in Black America, according to white America. So the only thing that was left was for people like me to think it was ladies like me. And so I— So this is… the liberal dream, the idea that we are getting better. I don't think I can excuse myself from that fantasy. And as Claudia Rankine has said, fantasies cost lives.

NANCY STEINER:
So you had a reckoning. How did that happen, and what did it teach you?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
Well, it took me a long time. And one of the things I want to be sure I express is, while there's anger and frustration in some levels of the work I've done, I also want to give grace and see this as an invitation for people to be on their own journey. If you say to somebody that everything you do is racist, or something that you love… This has been passed down with love. This particular song has been passed down as a cherished tradition in families, in schools, at ball games, things like that. So you can't expect— I don't expect my white readers to suddenly necessarily be like, "Okay, great, that's it. It's gone for me." It took me years. I thought for a long time that the answer would be to maybe just sing it with its original words, which include a slur in every

verse about the status and beings, dehumanizing word about Black people.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Because that would just force me, and whoever was listening, to reckon with it as well. We now know that's probably a bad idea to replicate in any kind of public setting because of the harm it does. So I would be singing the song to my kids in its original— as they were going to sleep, it was part of the repertoire, but with these original words. So there was a phase like that. And then there was the phase where even though I knew, when that song would come on at this moment of moments, before this two minute horse race, that people have been waiting days, weeks, whatever, for it to happen, that I would still feel the emotion even though I couldn't sing it myself.

NANCY STEINER:

In your own journey with the book, you made some discovery. Your family has been known for being very progressive, very liberal, sort of defining great democratic values. Those were presented to you. And they imbibed you with your own sense of fairness, and equal justice for all. And yet you discovered

things weren't as democratically ducky as they seem.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Yeah. So there I was doing archival research, like digging into how does this song worm its way into all kinds of things, including tourism. It's a hundred years ago, it's the early 1920's, and Kentucky, which has kind of a iffy reputation as being a violent place where the Hatfields and the McCoys are at it all of the time. And might not be a good place to start a business, or visit, or live. They came upon the concept that this song, people all over the world loved. So why couldn't we build a new brand on "My Old Kentucky Home"? Let's capture some of this nostalgia that this song is wrapped in. And in fact, they found a house and developed the first plantation tourism attraction in the country. A form of tourism that has defined an entire region to the world, the deep south. But we're talking about Kentucky.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

My great-grandfather, who helped start this plantation tourism experience for Kentucky as it's part of its rebranding as a state where you could revisit a glorious past. They called it the 'Happy Home of Slavery'. He writes a letter sharing his earliest memory with the author of *Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell. His first memory as a little boy was of opening a door to an apparition in his North Carolina home. And that apparition taking its hood off and sweeping him up into embrace because it was his father who had been out night riding for the KKK. The connection to me, and how that felt to me, to see a person who had only scorn for the aspirations of the Black people who

were left in the wake of slavery, and only honor for someone who was restoring white power, seemed to link very well with the restoration of a plantation myth in Kentucky in the 1920's.

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EMILY BINGHAM:
So 50 years later, that little boy is a man with wealth and money. And this is one of the things he chooses to do with his time. It made me feel that his progressiveness was not fake. He did believe in votes for women. But that we can't— we are always trying to run away from— In the stories I heard about him, nobody brought this up. We're always trying to run away from the things that shame us, and that shame our country and its history.

NANCY STEINER:
So did you feel personal shame that you had a relative who was a member of the klan? Even though it was so many hundreds of years ago? Or did you sort of feel like, well, that was then and this is now?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
When I learned that I had somebody who was taking part in extralegal violence, racial violence, I was appalled. And I swore to myself that I would never hide it. That all of my children would know. That my children's children are going to know this. That my nieces and nephews and cousins, and we're all going to know this. And the other thing that I did is try to figure out what action to take. And I'm in the process desperately trying to get the University of North Carolina to strip his name off a building. That building should not be

named for someone who was taking part in those activities.

NANCY STEINER:
So you actually went to UNC, and you saw his name on the building? That was quite an experience for you. And then discovered this, is that right?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
Right. Right. So I had been a graduate student at Chapel Hill, this flagship university in North Carolina. And there I would pass on my way to the library, all the time, this Bingham name etched into one of the major classroom buildings. I just um… I was sort of embarrassed, not because… I didn't know anything about his racist past. I was embarrassed because I didn't want people to think I was a big deal or something. I just wanted to be a regular student. So my embarrassment was completely misplaced. It was all about me. And this is one of the great opportunities of maturing and learning, and getting more information, is that we can get out of ourselves and see the landscape more truly for what it is. And that's one of the great positives, I feel like, about the process of this book for me.

NANCY STEINER:
So it had to have been difficult for you to put Robert Hall Bingham, the building, and Robert Hall Bingham, the Klansman, together for you?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
It took a while, right. And I think I'm very fortunate in the sense that I know a

lot more family history than a lot of people do. Especially Black people in this country, who had their family histories completely erased by sale and separation. As well as oppression, illiteracy, all of those things. But there are so many stories like this. The KKK had hundreds, thousands, millions of people who have belonged to it over the years. My story isn't unique. It's only that I can have a more granular vista into it, or telescope into it, than most people are able to do. And this is, again, where the whitewashing of our nation's past, and the way this pretty song helps us do it is a bigger story. It's not just about a song.

NANCY STEINER:

Your great grandfather, Robert Worth Bingham, applauded the song when it played in 1900 at The Lost Cause Ball. You write that, "During the peak of white and Black violence, he joined millions who celebrated the continued oppression that made the New South consistent with the Old South. If you had dark skin. When his father died, he framed the Confederate flag and put it in his office." When you explain this to your children who, like you, thought, "Oh, well the Bingham's of Louisville are desegregationist. We are for equal justice." How do you explain it?

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EMILY BINGHAM:

I mean, in some level, it's not a surprise. Of course, my great-grandfather danced at The Lost Cause Ball. I mean, he was from the South. His family had been confederates. Some people might be surprised a little bit that in Louisville, Kentucky, The Lost Cause was being celebrated in 1900. Well, they shouldn't be. Because the myth of how– what the war was about, and the

valor of the people who fought to defend their home place, and the enslavement of people as a central piece of that, it was ubiquitous. And so he was part of that stream. You don't need a confederate in your attic to be part of this stream of time, where that stream includes white supremacy in all of the forms that are coursing through.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

What we can do, though, is see that while we're in that stream, we can put our heads up, look around, see it for what it is, and swim in a different direction. And people will be there with you. That is what the hope of a better understanding of our history of this slave burdened nation is. And when I think of the hundreds of thousands of people, millions, whose lives were defined by that and it may seem watered down, but it is not, it still in the stream, are being affected by it today, by financially, by the culture, and what it expects and requires of them by a criminal justice system. All of that still can be tied back to the structures and assumptions that that system put in place.

NANCY STEINER:

It wasn't just a song played just in Kentucky during the twenties and thirties every night before sign off, “My Old Kentucky Home” reached the eastern half of the United States. It became almost like a national anthem. Can you explain that? It even showed up in a Bugs Bunny cartoon in the fifties. So it really is part of the national landscape in a way, and it's also an opportunity, therefore, for understanding how we got to where we are.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Right. I mean, we now want to locate evil white supremacy and racism in one part of the country. In fact, that's been a knee jerk reaction for a couple– few generations. Just because there were abolitionists in the North doesn't mean that there weren't a lot of people who were also caught up in a racist mindset. Almost everybody was. So this song, which comes out of minstrelsy, Blackface minstrelsy, which was invented in the North, written by a man from Pittsburgh to be sung by white men in Blackface on stages about Black people to audiences of white people. That's what it was. That worms its way into parlors where families sing it. It worms its way into school songbooks, where music classes sing it up through the 1970s.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

It worms its way into vaudeville and Hollywood where it appears in Bugs Bunny cartoons like Southern Fried Rabbit, where Bugs, to deal with a difficult Yosemite Sam, puts on brownface, Blackface. He turns from gray to brown and starts strumming "My Old Kentucky Home'' to calm down this fire popping, you know, ex-confederate who's trying to shoot him, which actually is hilarious, but it makes light of the violence and requirements that actual Brown and Black people had to suffer.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

And then, you know, Hollywood, I mentioned, you can't hardly go down the line of Hollywood hits of the thirties and forties without stumbling over this

song. You have *Gone With The Wind* (1939). Prissy sings it just before Scarlett O'Hara slaps her for not going fast enough to get the doctor when white Melanie is suffering, it's all about the white suffering. But Prissy is saying, "Just a few more days for to tote the weary load." And that is a line from the song. Or Bilbo Jangles Robinson hums it as he does his remarkable, unbelievable athletic tap dance up the stairs in a movie called *The Little Colonel* (1935) with none other than Shirley Temple, wide-eyed, following him up the steps because he's so seductive and this song brings the crowd in and her as well.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

And all the way up to *Mad Men*, recently used it in sort of a shocking scene in one of their seasons where Don Draper is slightly appalled, but his wife thinks it's just hilarious that his boss is Blacked up and on his knees singing to his fiance. So it continues to be quoted. It continues to be a touchstone for our ideas of what is acceptable and joyous and fun and heartwarming. And then also in the case of something like *Mad Men*, of trying to put a distance between that and where we are today.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

“My Old Kentucky Home” becomes a political statement in the 1960s, fifties, sixties, and seventies, because it contains a slur, the word darkie, to refer to Black people who are enslaved, throughout the song. Black Americans had made absolutely clear that this was offensive to them. They had asked networks to stop using the song because of it, or at least to allow

substitutions. But Richard Nixon, who wanted to very much align himself with an aggrieved white electorate in the 1968 election, comes to Kentucky to the Derby and says, and makes clear that his absolute favorite part of the whole thing is singing "My Kentucky Home." That is a time where it was still sung with the slur intact. And that was a messaging that went perfectly with his southern strategy to try to get voters who didn't normally want to vote for a Republican to consider crossing the line and voting for him.

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EMILY BINGHAM:
And I love that at that same Derby, there was a group of Black student union students from University of Louisville who were outside the gates of Churchill Downs protesting that this was going on when the neighborhoods of Black America required the attention of white America. And they said in their press release, "The darkies are gay no longer."

NANCY STEINER:
So the song changes over the years, words are replaced. What does that tell us about where the country was? How does it mirror what was happening in the country and what those changes meant?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
So, the 1980s come around, and it is really past time for this song to be fully updated, but it hasn't happened. It's a piecework thing. In places where— There were parts of schools where the song was still being sung in its original form. There were people who, even though Churchill Downs had said, "Oh,

we'll substitute people for darkies," they still rung out with it because that's what felt good to them in defiance of propriety or good manners, much less anti-racism. But what eventually occurs is a remarkable story. A group of Japanese kids is touring Kentucky. They're part of a program to immerse in American culture, and they go to the state capital.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

They're in session, they go to the gallery where the legislators are, and they stand up and do what came of naturally. They're in Kentucky. They sang “My Old Kentucky Home,” and they sang about the darkies being gay. The legislators are up, they're crying, they're taking their hats off, except for one. And it is 1986, who says, "I can't believe this is happening and I'm going to sit down." So that is when the state took action a few weeks later to officially turn this song into one that didn't contain those slurs. They just erased them and substituted the word people. Victory. Right? Finally. Right? But not really. There's an irony in it that once a song that had been, I like to say, white washing slavery for many years and making the slave trade into something that just seemed sort of, "Sorry."

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Then suddenly ghosts it all together. You don't know what the song is about. So even though this did meet the requests, the pleadings of so many generations of people who'd protested the song and said it dehumanized them, its continuation in its edited form, I would argue, merely allowed the continuation of this exploitative piece of our culture that benefits one group

and not another. It emotionally benefits them as well as financially.

NANCY STEINER:
What do you think would happen if the song was written today, and how are people finding a place for it now?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
It's mind boggling to imagine a song about slavery being written today for use in spaces the way it is used. We might write a song about slavery. We might learn a lot from that song, but would we ever stand up and sing it before a sporting event, linking arms and honoring it as something to be proud of? In South Africa do they stand up and before cricket matches and belt out a song about apartheid? No. Same thing in Germany. You would never imagine a state occasion where the lawmakers and officials would rise and link arms and talk about a song about the Holocaust.

NANCY STEINER:
Exactly. So what makes it okay then to keep singing this song now?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
It seems incredibly inappropriate to sing about slavery and this level of excruciating national pain in celebratory settings, why does it continue? Because we cling to our past, we cling to our fantasies and we cling to our profit margins. And until it becomes unprofitable or it becomes so clearly repulsive, and I think those two end up being together, right? Going together.

This song will continue to be sung, because we are so insecure as a nation. We try so hard to think of ourselves as perfect or close to perfect. We don't want to share with our children that we have ways to go before we sleep.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

We don't want to let go. And I think this is one example of something that actually, it's so small, and yet it is so emblematic. Couldn't we let go? What would it take? I had to let go. I had to say, "This is something that harms folks." I just have no— It may have given me pleasure in the past, and I admit it did. And I can find other ways to celebrate our place or my people without doing harm directly. But until it's too embarrassing and therefore becomes unprofitable, you will continue to have tourists going to “My Old Kentucky Home'' and thinking it's just lovely. You will have Derby goers in their hats drunk on juleps, and having just the best time feeling nostalgic when the song strikes up.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

And you will have kids bands all over the state of Kentucky learning to play it on the tuba for the big football game, and people being buried to it as well. But the thing that mostly upsets me at this point, is these public, large places. It's the context that to me, is especially egregious because it's trying to show what one part of our nation thinks it deserves to hold onto. And its inability to listen to the impact of that.

NANCY STEINER:

And you see that happening today. You see that this is falling on deaf ears in a way. Correct? Is that what you're saying, that this is still a clinging to the past that people just aren't willing to let go of? And in fact, it offers them a certain kind of solace and a sense of place that's kind of comforting.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Well I think it has— All right. So this song and so many things like it, like going to a plantation as a tourist, have offered a kind of solace to white America about the past. But something has changed. You know what has changed? This song demanded, actually required, Black performers to sing it for a century until— because white people wanted to hear this song that was a favorite of theirs performed by the people that they knew it was about. So we're talking about Paul Robinson, Marian Anderson, countless performers from before, just mentioned Bilbo Jangles Robinson. They were told to sing this song because of its soothing effects.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

But something really has changed since Ferguson, since the Black Lives Matter movement began. And this deserves, I think, enormous marking. Fewer Black people have felt the need, the requirement to be quiet when they are uncomfortable, fewer Black people are swallowing their frustrations with this ongoing system. The song is one small piece of it has always been one small piece of it, but in the case of "My Old Kentucky Home," Black people are standing up, but just as in any progress on civil rights in this country, it will only change when white people stand up or stand it down if that's the case it

may be.

NANCY STEINER:
I would love you to speak to what it is that you have learned. What wisdom have you gleaned from this experience about yourself and about your country?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
In this old, old song, I found a path to seeing how many times we in this nation, and I, myself, as an individual American, have to hear something before I really listen.

NANCY STEINER:
When you finally get it, and you have the appalling recognition, what shifts? Where's your pivot? What happens?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
What shifts is you go from— I am no longer a person who can sit comfortably in the sense that I am enough, I'm doing enough and fine, I'm good. I'm not mean to people. I'm not a racist. I don't do things that make others uncomfortable. I do. I did. And I, no doubt, continue to. So to me, it's the realization that that journey is always going on. There is no sense of cleansing from it. We are all in it. The muck sticks to us, and I'm not going to smell good. And that's okay. It's actually okay. That doesn't mean I don't— Being okay doesn't mean you don't have a lot of work to do. Being okay means you

don't just wallow in shame. I don't— What it hasn't done is stopped me from… Just because things are bad doesn't mean you stop. It just means you have to keep going and admit that there's joy in knowledge and in knowing that that knowledge can take us and yourself, but the larger world in that stream that we're swimming in by swimming a little different way, take us in a slightly different direction and we must.

NANCY STEINER:
So would you consider yourself an activist?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
People like me who go through doctoral programs in US History were taught that we weren't supposed to be activists out in the world. But the truth is, you do this work that speaks to the moment. What else can you do? It is an act. It is an active act. I have people come to me all the time saying, "Well, now what do we do?" And in a way, I think they want me to lead the process from here on out. I do acknowledge that I have a role in that. I mean, the book is there. I poured myself into it. I am an activist in so many other ways. I want this to be a movement that is, whatever happens with this song, it is not something that I as a white privileged person should lead.

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EMILY BINGHAM:
But it is a movement that a lot of people who look like me will join, eventually. I don't know how long it will take. It can't be just me running up a banner with a book at the top. It has to be broader than that. And it has to come from

things that shift in people's internally. The other thing people come to me and tell me in the wake of reading the book is that this song, and the way I told about its worming into the culture and my own family and self, has reminded them of the things that they are carrying. The burdens they are carrying around race in their own lives, that they are afraid to tell their children about, that they are ashamed of, that they are scared they will get in trouble with their community if it is known.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

These burdens need to be laid down and laid out. And that is what I think permits the activism and permits the movement. Otherwise, we just get stuck in ourselves. And there is plenty of embarrassment to go around, but that doesn't mean you can't pick up and move as long as you aren't paralyzed by it. So yes, there's a thing called engaged scholarship. I mean, that is such a horrible word. I mean, it's such an undescriptive word. All scholars who are speaking to the moment, all writers, fiction, nonfiction, who are moving people, are asking for and playing the role of action and activism. There's no way around that.

NANCY STEINER:

What is your response to people who say, “Okay, Emily, you're a Bingham. Boohoo.” You know, “Ladida darling. What do you know about the experience of slavery in this country? You're a white privileged kid who grew up in the biggest house on the block.”

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EMILY BINGHAM:

I mean, what can I do about that? I was born with immense privilege, educational privilege, financial resources, a stable home, a sense of my past and history. These are riches beyond measure. Not to mention just stability. Never hungry. That doesn't take anything away from my ability to perceive or share knowledge, or be part of the world. I'm not going to go hide because of that. And in fact, I think if anything, it gives me a greater sense of responsibility to make sure that those privileges are more widely shared. I'm not saying feel sorry for me. I would never say that. I want there to be a sense of ownership of those goods of our society that is much broader and fairer and juster than it is.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Someone told me an amazing story about visiting a plantation home and a tourist site. She's a Black poet, and her daughter was with her. And her daughter went around everywhere there were, every room, and was touching everything in the room. It was very uncomfortable. You're not supposed to really touch everything when you're on a guided tour. And her mother turned to her afterwards and said, “Why are you doing this? Why are you touching all this stuff?” And she said, “I want to touch the things that my enslaved ancestors weren't allowed to touch.” That is what we need. We need that permission to touch and to be seen in as part of the story. And it is not just Black Americans, it's brown Americans, it's our refugees. It's lots of others. But there is a narrative of this country that still wants to center one story about exceptionalism, that we aren't burdened by the terrible things of the

old other continents. And, you know, that we are ourselves making great progress. And we know the data that is not true. We are still tearing families apart in this country.

NANCY STEINER:
What was your family's response to the book?

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EMILY BINGHAM:
There are a bunch of embarrassing, I guess, stories that I write about when I write about "My Old Kentucky Home." And my family are really smart people who are writers of some of them themselves. And I think they understand that mythologizing ourselves as a family has never done us any good. I hope that if they have twinges of unease when they learn that, for instance, my parents didn't seem very excited about Muhammad Ali moving next door in the 1970s. That's incredibly ridiculous to me, but that was the case, that they can see that in the arc of time and in the arc of complex human beings, which we all are. So I don't think anybody, any human being deserves to be on a pedestal. And no family does either and certainly mine doesn't.

NANCY STEINER:
So was anybody upset with you?

00:49:22:00

EMILY BINGHAM:
They're too polite. No, I really don't think they were. I don't, I felt very supported. And so even when things were embarrassing, they weren't mad at

me. No. What could they say?

NANCY STEINER:
So music, as you write, can be a form of mind control. Can you speak to that just for a minute?

EMILY BINGHAM:
So all of us have had a song worm its way into our brain where we just hum it, or it keeps coming back to us on repeat. Right. We can't get it out of our thoughts. And “My Old Kentucky Home” has been in the brains of many, many people over many generations. Millions, millions of hours. You can't possibly measure it. And I think when we love a song, there's nothing wrong with whatever it brings up for us. I would never say you shouldn't love it or that it is wrong to have a reaction to it.

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EMILY BINGHAM:
But I think we can commit wrongs when we refuse to understand what we claim to love. And that is where context and art come together and things don't just float without context. And this is one of those examples. You need to take at least account of where something came from if you're going to commit to it. And I think that history is like this, too. I mean, it's not far away. All this seems so far from people. “My Old Kentucky Home” is one of the things that has kept the ideas of the 1850s, the stereotypes of Black people, the fantasy of a happy home of slavery alive in us. In us like a song.

NANCY STEINER:

People have asked Churchill Downs to stop. And because they're a private-owned organism, they can do whatever they want. The state of Kentucky has been appealed to stop this from being the state song. Can you explain where we are with that? And this unyielding need to keep this alive?

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EMILY BINGHAM:

So what is the future of "My Old Kentucky Home," which is so enshrined at this point? Not only in people's hearts, but in institutions. And that is one of the ways it continues to be enshrined in hearts. Churchill Downs has said that they are continuing to use the song because their fans like it. Someone quipped that people liked lynchings, too. That is not to compare that they're the same thing, but they do tap into the same history and the same sense of power, I think, that is at work. But to me, that statement from Churchill Downs is an opening. If the fans don't like it, the operation will shift its gaze away from it. And it may no longer be the Derby song. And there may be a search for a new, I mean, there I think will be one day a search for something that the fans like better.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

So that's number one. What does the future hold with University of Kentucky football games and basketball games where this has played every single game and some people have to walk out of the stadium before it comes on, or else again, feel like dehumanized? I think that as younger players and students, members of those teams, members of those marching bands understand

some of the history better. I do think it will get harder and harder for that to be a song that will feel comfortable for them to rouse the crowd with. And then for the state of Kentucky, this is where I think things get very difficult. Not only because its political and political bodies are very slow to change, but also because Kentucky remains so tightly branded to this song.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

And it's been a hundred years. It has literally been a century since that branding process was affected by white leaders and white marketers. So to be clear, really, business people, politicians. When they realize that it is no longer a successful brand, the time will— the song will no longer be at the top of people's minds or be sung or be the state song and state songs have changed before. It's just that they aren't as deeply embedded in the culture of the state as this one is. So, I think it will happen, but it's going to take many years of work.

NANCY STEINER:

The wisdom that I can give back here is that.

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EMILY BINGHAM:

Every book I've written has taken me into a place I didn't expect. And this one about the song that my people of my state love so much, for me, is the best gift I know how to give to the people and the state I love so much, because honesty is not something to run from. And I have been able to find in myself and for my own family that that honesty is freeing and enables me to act in

ways that I can be proud of.

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