



The Library
UC SAN DIEGO

Learning from the Germans

Race and the Memory of Evil - with Susan Neiman

October 03, 2019

54 minutes, 09 seconds

Speaker: Susan Neiman

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

UC San Diego Library Digital Collections

<https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb6830970z>

Copyright: Under copyright (US)

Rights Holder: UC Regents

Use: This work is available from the UC San Diego Library. This digital copy of the work is intended to support research, teaching, and private study.

Constraint(s) on Use: This work is protected by the U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). Use of this work beyond that allowed by "fair use" requires written permission of the UC Regents. Responsibility for obtaining permissions and any use and distribution of this work rests exclusively with the user and not the UC San Diego Library. Inquiries can be made to the UC San Diego Library program having custody of the work.

Time Transcription

00:05 [Read Write Think Dream / The Library UC San Diego Channel /
www.uctv.tv/library-channel]

00:10 Susan Neiman: I've been asked how I got to write this book, and I have two answers to that. One is I've kind of been writing it all my life. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, not a real Southerner, my parents moved from Chicago right before I was born, so we were very much other. In those days in Atlanta, it was a tiny place, not what it is now. And my mother got involved in the campaign to desegregate the Atlanta public schools, so I grew up around the civil rights movement when good and evil and progress were uncontested concepts, and I hated being from the South, I mean all I wanted to do was grow up and leave and go to New York or Europe, neither of which I knew anything about, but now looking back on it, it was a good time to grow up then and there, and although I wouldn't have admitted it until very recently, I think that was probably the reason I wound up studying philosophy and within philosophy moral and political philosophy. And so I have to thank my mother for being an example of moral clarity when I was very young. How'd I get to Berlin? Well, so I was writing a dissertation on Immanuel Kant in the early [19]80s, and it was, it seemed like a good idea to spend what I thought would be a year in Berlin learning German, learning a little bit about [Immanuel] Kant, and it was a time at which almost no Americans who weren't part of the army and no Jews set foot there.

02:06 Susan Neiman: And, you know, I kept being asked, what's a nice Jewish girl doing going for a whole year to Berlin? And my answer at the time was completely naive, I said, look, the war's been over for 40 years, isn't it racist to condemn the entire German people? So I'm just gonna go and think about [Immanuel] Kant and [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe and that's what I'm gonna do. And, of course, and if you've been to Berlin, you realize that even back then when you had a very, you know, it was just the beginning of the country coming to terms with its Nazi past, even back then the war was all over the place. You couldn't escape it, it was all that people talked about. So, and my first response actually was to be both impressed and a little ashamed that Americans didn't talk about the things in our past that are shameful and violent, and it was a huge contrast, so I did think about that for a long time and watched Germany making progress by, not by leaps and bounds, by zigs and zags, as President Obama once put it. But I found my way back to Berlin. I stayed there for six years in the [19]80s, left at a moment when everybody said, oh, nothing is going to happen here anymore, this was 1988, nobody knew what was coming. But I also had my first child there, and it did not feel like a normal place to raise a Jewish child or even a child who wasn't entirely German. I mean it was a place where it was odd and sometimes difficult to be a foreigner at all, to look non-Aryan.

04:20 Susan Neiman: So I went back to the States; I taught at Yale. I was in Israel for five years, and the Einstein Forum found me, and it seemed like the perfect job for me because it involved having a foot in academia but also a foot in the rest of the

world, which I like. And it seemed to me that 12 years after I had left Berlin that I could take, by that time it was three children, I had twins the second time around. I could raise three children who would not feel that they had to cower, that they had to be afraid, that they had to be in hiding in some sense. So that's a little bit about my, the part of my biography that doesn't appear on the CV [Curriculum Vitae] and that in some sense has been fueling my interest in these topics for a long time, but the actual, there was a moment when I decided to write this book, and it was standing in my study in June of 2015 crying watching President Obama give the eulogy for the nine people who were massacred in Charleston. And as awful as that was, it seemed to me with someone like Nikki Haley taking down the Confederate flag and Walmart saying they weren't gonna sell Confederate memorabilia, I thought, wait, maybe America really is ready to face its past. And actually, this is something that I know something about and could contribute to the discussion. So that was the moment at which I started writing the book, and at the same time, Germany had just welcomed one million refugees. And when I say welcomed, it's not only that people stood at train stations carrying signs saying welcome, which they did by the thousands, they took people into their homes, they spent time giving people German lessons and helping them with bureaucracy and playing soccer and music with the children.

06:42 Susan Neiman: There has been a backlash, we can talk about that later in the Q and A if you like, but the ultimate answer is, it is still the case that more people are involved in active refugee integration than voted for our right-wing party, and that is good news, and that is, Germany's been the most progressive country in Europe because they have done this historical work. They have a long compound word, Germans like long compound words, in German it's called *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* [working through the past], and I have translated that as working off the past, there are different ways of translating it, but I think that works best. And because of that *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* [working through the past], the Germans have been better than anybody else in Europe, not to mention anywhere else, with the refugees. And you have to, if you think about proportions, the United States would've had to take in five million refugees in one year on a fraction of the land mass if we were going to mirror what the Germans have done, so that's just a fact. Of course, as we know, things changed from 2015, but, again, we can also talk about that.

08:17 Susan Neiman: So what I'd like to start off by doing is showing you some pictures. Most of you have probably seen pictures of the Holocaust Monument. What, I tried to take a picture that shows this, but it's the American embassy is in the way, that white building on the far right. I wanted you to get a sense of the fact that this is the center of the country. This is not off somewhere in a park. They took a piece of land the size of four football fields in, right next to the national symbol, which is Brandenburg Gate, and they put a monument of shame, as they've been criticized by the right for doing, a monument of shame in the absolute heart of the country. It

would be, I mean more than the Washington Mall. But it's not my favorite monument. This is probably my favorite monument, not that many people have seen it. It is the monument to the 13 million soldiers of the Red Army who fell in the fight to liberate the world from fascism. I know Americans think it was done at Normandy and Brits think it was done by the RAF [Royal Air Force], and, you know, all honor to the servicemen who fell there, but it was 13 million Red Army soldiers, and 14 million Soviet civilians, and we forget that often.

10:01 Susan Neiman: If you get a chance to go to Berlin, I, I highly urge you to go to this monument. I've taken my rabbi there, I've taken a bunch of people there. It is, it is emotional in a way that I don't find the more famous Holocaust memorial. Seven thousand of the soldiers who fell in the battle for Berlin are buried here. And what I didn't show is first you come to a statue, an over-life-sized statue of a mourning mother and then there are weeping willows, and then you come to this sort of arch where the soldiers are honoring their fallen comrades. And then you walk through a sort of set of, I mean they look like sarcophagi, they're not, telling the story of um, of the war. Don't be disturbed by the fact that the quotes and they have quotes and they're sort of bas-reliefs, the quotes are by Stalin, but actually except for the very first one, which says everything was fine in the Soviet Union until the Nazis invaded, except for the first one, everything that's written there is true. So you go through and you see this 30-meter statue, I guess it's rather hard to see here, I'll show you. So that's about the size of a person. And in one hand he's holding a sword, which has just smashed a swastika, and in the other hand, he's holding a child who he's saved out of the rubble. Of course, they didn't win the war with swords on this, but this, I find it very moving.

11:58 Susan Neiman: But I find even more moving this memorial. This memorial is to the women of the Rosenstrasse. The Nuremberg laws, as I'm sure many of you know, forbade marriages between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans, but some peoples who had been married before stayed faithful to their spouses although a lot of pressure was put on them, they would usually lose their jobs, they would, you know, their rations would be cut, it was extremely difficult, but some people remained faithful. And their spouses were not deported for a while. In 1943, the Nazis decided they wanted to do a trial run and see what would happen if they did start deporting some of these spouses who remained married, and they rounded up 400 Jewish men who were married to Jewish women. This is February 1943, it's one of the worst moments of the war. It's also freezing cold, and these women, most of whom didn't know each other, came spontaneously to this place where their men were being held, and they said, give us our men back, we're not leaving. And the Gestapo trained guns on them, and they said, you can shoot us, we don't care anymore, we're not leaving until you give us our husbands back. And they got them back. None of those, I guess, 800 people was deported. They all survived, and this monument is, was made by a sculptor who was a child of one of these marriages.

13:53 Susan Neiman: And it's a very important and moving story that shows that resistance is always possible. Sometimes people say, well, Gandhi worked in Britain and Martin Luther King worked in the States because we're civilized people. Well, actually when people are brave enough, you never know. Don't worry, I'm not gonna show you any, all of the, I think it's 470 monuments in Berlin alone, but I want to show you this one. This is a monument commemorating the book burning in 1933 when just a few months after the Nazis took over power. There's an inscription by the poet Heinrich Heine who said, when people, when they start burning books, eventually they will burn people. And an Israeli artist did this, it's a small monument, right at the place where the books were burned, and it's just empty shelves because they burned many of the great works of German literature, philosophy, anything that was written by a Jew or a Communist or anybody else that they considered to be enemies. But you can also see in the background the Humboldt University, and what you should know is that it was students and professors who burnt the books. We're not talking about an illiterate mob, the highest proportion of Nazi party members had university degrees. So it was students and professors burning these books.

15:39 Susan Neiman: Okay, last monument slide, this is one of my favorites, if you've been to Berlin, you will have noticed the stumbling stones. They're, well, you can see the scale of how large they are. They were begun by this artist, Gunter Demnig. He's now 70. He still lays most of the stones himself. There is a stone or a brass plaque for, in front of houses where people lived who were deported. It has their name, the date of their birth, the date of their deportation, and the date of their death if it's known. And he insists now that people be involved, if they want a stumbling stone, they have to do something. They have to pay the equivalent of about \$125, which is affordable. I mean we're not talking about a vast amount of money. It's something a middle-class person could decide to do, but they also have to research the history of the person who they're commemorating and they have to get permission from the city. And people do this. People also deface them occasionally, they sometimes pull them up, but the last time that there were stones pulled up in Berlin more people volunteered to replace, I mean just hundreds of people volunteered to replace them.

17:04 Susan Neiman: And those stones were the inspiration for Bryan Stevenson's Lynching Memorial. Which I hope you've heard about. Bryan Stevenson is actually one of my heroes because he has done or continues to do two incredibly important and moving things. One is, he fights the death penalty and he actually has saved people's lives. If you haven't read his wonderful book, *Just Mercy*, please do so, it's fantastic. But the other thing that he does is to connect the racism and mass incarceration that we're dealing with today with American history and with our inability to have faced the depth of white supremacy. And he told me, I went to Montgomery to interview him, he told me, well, I went 'cause I had seen something where he said he was completely inspired by Germany and by the ways in which

the Germans had changed the iconography, and he wants to do the same thing in the South. He, um, so there's the large monument, but the large monument has a kind of parallel outside. There's a block for each county in which his institute, the Equal Justice Initiative, has researched a documented lynching. And the idea is that the county should come back and claim their marker so that along with, if you ever spend any time in the South, you can't go two miles without seeing a sign commemorating some Confederate battle or another, the idea is that the counties should also have these markers commemorating lynchings, and they're doing it. They're actually, the museum only opened last year, and they're doing it.

19:13 Susan Neiman: Okay, so how come the Germans have done all this and we haven't? I know that Nazi, Holocaust, are often, I gather, not in this crowd, I was just told this is a very educated audience, but in many parts of this country and in Britain as well, Nazi just means absolute evil without knowing anything about how the Nazis came to power, without knowing anything about how the Germans have dealt with it in the intervening 75 years. And so the assumption isn't, you know, the thought is Nazi, cattle car, gas chamber, oven, they must have fallen on their knees the minute the war was over. You know, we do have the picture of Willy Brandt, who was a complete outlier, we can talk about that. We all, in the rest of the world, admired him for showing that there were good Germans even though he spent the war in exile, that there were Germans who felt like falling on their knees and begging forgiveness. He was an outlier, and the gesture was not appreciated in West Germany at the time, at all. On the contrary, their cities had been destroyed, seven million people, seven million Germans had died in the war, and even though there was some attempt in the first years of the Allied occupation to force Germans to go to concentration camps, there you can see, you see a woman smiling, you see a woman being horrified. People complained about it. They complained about Nuremberg as a case of victor's justice. And their basic view was, we were the worst victims of the war. Our cities were destroyed, the flower of our youths. Somebody's shaking her head, I know. It took me decades to realize this.

21:59 Susan Neiman: I had many friends when I first came to Germany who would tell me, my parents were Nazis and they were ashamed, or my father would never talk about what he did on the Eastern Front and I wish I knew, but he would just get angry if I asked. So they would tell me that much, but they never said, my parents were Nazis and they thought they were the war's worst victims, which is, it was, that was too much shame. So it took me a very long time to figure it out. It was really only when I was researching the book that I was reading things written and transcripts and studies done right after the war where this opinion got voiced very often. Then I would ask people about it, really? And they said, oh, of course, of course, we thought we were the worst victims. We were hungry. It was cold. There was no fuel. You know, the flower of our men had been killed in the war. People were incinerated in the bombings, and on top of that, well, let me show you

another slide. By the way, this is not just a view in the late [19]40s and early [19]50s. When, in 1995 at the 50th anniversary of the war the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, which was actually founded and run by a friend of mine who I interview extensively in this book, decided to do a big exhibit called the Wehrmacht Exhibit which broke the war's, the country's last taboo because there were 18 million men serving in the Wehrmacht. And the line had been, oh yeah, well we heard about the concentration camps, but that was the SS, that wasn't the Wehrmacht. There were a few bad apples. We had trials, we had the Auschwitz trials which made more of an impression in Germany than the Eichmann trial, but it was a few bad apples.

24:19 Susan Neiman: And the Wehrmacht Exhibit set out to show that actually, the Wehrmacht itself was a criminal organization. They violated every law of war. They routinely and systematically killed civilians. We know that I felt like it was, saying what I heard about it was like, oh, yeah, like the Earth is round or water is wet, this is news? But actually, it was incredibly controversial. It was shown in 33 cities in Germany. One place it was firebombed, and there were counterdemonstrations. This is what was so interesting. So on the far right, it says, our grandfathers were heroes. Down here it says, I'm standing up for my ancestor, all he was doing was defending his homeland against the nasty Bolsheviks, and you're dishonoring my ancestors by showing this exhibit. Who does that sound like? [audience laughs] Oh my God. Same kind of language that we have seen in the battles over the Confederate monuments, exactly the same kind of language. Now, the good news in Germany is 5,000 neo-Nazis demonstrated in Munich but 10,000 counter demonstrators demonstrated back, fascism isn't an opinion, it's a crime. No Nazis in Munich. At the top, you can actually see the exhibit, and a million people came to see it in the various places that it was shown and were looking to see if they could recognize themselves if they could recognize their relatives. The exhibit itself became subject of documentation because people's reactions were so strong. It went all the way to parliament. Some people argued it should be shown in parliament, it wasn't.

26:47 Susan Neiman: Oh, I should have mentioned actually, sorry, in the course of writing this book, I was invited to give a talk at the University of Mississippi, and I'm the kind of person who was, you know, nervous to cross the state line. And I went because I thought, you know before you tell Americans what they should learn from the Germans actually really ought to see what people who are dealing with American history on the ground are doing. And there was a wonderful little institute called the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation based at the University of Mississippi. They're, of course, a tiny minority, but they are working to examine American history and to create social justice. They were responsible for bringing Edgar Ray Killen, the murderer of [James] Chaney, [Andrew] Goodman, and [Michael] Schwerner to trial 40 years later. They were responsible for some of the Emmett Till memorializing, so I was fascinated with their work, I loved it, and I

asked if I could come back. Said, don't worry, you won't have to pay for me, I have a sabbatical coming to me, but can I just come and watch what you do and follow you around and interview people and use that as a base for half a year? So I did. But of course, I was listening all the time to these battles over the this was 2017, the battles over the monuments. You know, Mississippi, I should make it very clear, because I spent so much time in Mississippi and because the book is focused in many ways on Germany and the American South, I don't by any means mean to suggest that racism is only a problem in the American South. As we know, it's a problem all over the country.

29:00 Susan Neiman: But the South won the narrative, actually, and by actually being in the South for two reasons, you can study American racism and American attempts to face it in a more concrete way than you can, I dare say, looking at the composition of this audience, in certain spaces in southern California or Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I spent a lot of my time. There simply are more African Americans in Mississippi, and so race is always conscious. I'm not saying that people know how to deal with it, but it's not something that you can ignore as easily as you can ignore it in other spaces. And the other thing is that Mississippians are obsessed with their history. So while they often get it wrong, you can't say they're not talking about history, they are. And it was there that I realized, you know, one thing we can learn from the Germans is that this is really hard. Even the Nazis weren't ready to face their past. It took a lot of work. Some people think it took a change of generations, but a change of generations by itself didn't do it. There was a lot of civil engagement by a fairly, I mean, the people who were pushing this when I first came to Berlin in the [19]80s were basically educated middle-class people in their 20s and 30s who felt terrible about the fact that their teachers and parents had been Nazis or at best bystanders. So they really did this work, but they were called Nestbeschmutzer [person who denigrates their own family or country], people who dirty their own nest. There was a huge amount of pushback in West Germany. East Germany was different; I could go into that if you're interested.

31:14 Susan Neiman: So we shouldn't be surprised, and this was actually a message of hope to my friends in Mississippi and activist colleagues there who have, you know, sometimes struggled with despair and how hard it is to get people to actually acknowledge the depth of racism in this country. It was interesting for them and hopeful to them to hear, oh, it took the Germans a lot of work too. And so it's not surprising if Newt Gingrich goes off the deep end when the *New York Times* initiates *The 1619 Project*. Of course, there's gonna be opposition, nobody wants to face the shameful things that were done in their name, but they can. So I just want to, before we turn to a discussion, I want to run through a few things that I think are crucial to any form of working off the past. One is, of course, questions of justice. In, there were the Nuremberg Trials. A very small number of big fish were tried and an even smaller number were executed, most of them got very

short sentences that were very quickly commuted. And they often went right into the government, except at the very top level. That was a sort of unspoken bargain that Adenauer made, we'll pay reparations to the state of Israel and to individual survivors as long as we don't actually have to do any *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* [working through the past]. We don't actually have to get the Nazis out of the civil service, the schools, the police, and we don't have to talk about this stuff; we can just. So there were very few trials in West Germany. There were quite a few more in East Germany.

33:20 Susan Neiman: But, there, so here are two rather famous trials. You probably, you may not recognize the man here. It was not until I think [19]94 that Edgar Ray Killen, the Klan leader who masterminded the murder of [James] Chaney, [Andrew] Goodman, and [Michael] Schwerner was actually brought to trial. But he did die in jail recently, even though people were reluctant to try an 80-year-old man and a preacher, at that. But as we know there, the trials of other murderers have not been as happy, and that is something that we still need to work on. But I want to conclude on a hopeful note, because I'm a kind of a silver lining sort of a woman, and it's been very hard to find a silver lining in the last couple of years. I have been in despair many, many times, and there were moments when I was writing this book where I thought, you're gonna write a, you think it's useful to write a book, I mean honestly this is ridiculous. The situation is too bad. I believe that the horribleness of the presidency that we're experiencing, hopefully not for all that much longer, the horribleness of it has caused white Americans to realize how deep white supremacy is a part of our history. And it's not that we were totally ignorant. As I said, I grew up during the civil rights movement, but the assumption was, you know, okay, there was slavery, but then we fought a civil war and there was segregation but then there was a civil rights movement, and nobody I know thought that the election of President Obama meant we were going to live in a post-racial future, but the arc was bending in the right direction, right?

35:52 Susan Neiman: And suddenly there's simply no denying that Trump would never have been elected did he not feed on the rage of millions of people who were angry about a black family in the White House. And a black family who, you can disagree with this or that policy of President Obama's - I can wish that he did a few things differently - I think he's too much of a neo-liberal - but, you know, all five of them, including Marian Robinson, the first granny, behaved with perfect grace, dignity, integrity, for eight years. And it enraged people. I met the people, you know, in the deep South, these are not, I mean I have friends who are enraged that he was too neo-liberal, but I met people who found it unbearable that basically, the Obama family undermined every possible excuse for racism, right? I mean, I never felt more proud to be represented by an American president and a first family. I never felt that in my entire life. Okay. But I really think that the awareness that white Americans are coming to as a result of this monstrous presidency that we're now living under has created an interest and awareness.

Remember *The 1619 Project*, I don't know how many of you have seen it, it's not just commemorating 400 years of slavery. The goal is to retell the history of America through the eyes of slavery. This is not a blip on our history. This is a fundamental part of who we were, and, you know, Henry Louis Gates' book and program on reconstruction, just the very fact that people are talking about reconstruction. Until I started doing this research, I'm embarrassed to say that my understanding of the period between the end of the Civil War and the Montgomery Bus Boycott was kind of a big blur.

38:38 Susan Neiman: And, uh, you know, Hillary Clinton could say in 2016 and she's certainly an educated woman, she was asked, you may remember, who her favorite president was, and she said, well, Abraham Lincoln. Fine, that's a great one to pick. She said because if he hadn't been assassinated, there wouldn't have been all that mess with reconstruction and Jim Crow and stuff. Now, three years later you can groan and that is a measure of the fact that you know, um, historians have been writing now in general publications. Of course, historians knew all the time, but you cannot escape it anymore. It's part of the general conversation. It's part of the conversation around the monuments because we know the monuments were put up in a particular time and place for particular reasons. Who knew? I didn't know until I started doing this research. That is from *The 1619 Project*, that quote. And I was asked by the editor of a distinguished national publication, she obviously hadn't read my book, but that's okay. She asked if I wanted to write something that was, this was maybe a month ago or three weeks ago, there was a Twitter storm, a white guest had complained that she went on a plantation tour and it was her vacation and she didn't want to hear about slavery and why was she forced to do this. And this editor asked, well, would you like to write something arguing that Americans should treat Confederate sites the way Germans treat Nazi sites? And I started thinking about it. I said, Nazi sites, Nazi sites are concentration camps. There is no one, not even our right-wing AfD [Alternative für Deutschland], who would somehow suggest, there are pictures of SS guards frolicking at Auschwitz, you can see them, I mean people grinning on their day off and picnicking and stuff like that, but nobody would suggest that we should go and have holidays and dress up in dirndls the way people dress up in hoop skirts.

41:20 Susan Neiman: I know AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] got into a lot of trouble for calling the camps at the border concentration camps, but of course, they're concentration camps. Concentration camp is not the same thing as a death camp, as I'm sure many of you know. There were thousands of concentration camps all over Germany. They were not just in Poland. That's where the death camps were. And millions of people were forced, Jews and, well, in the end not so many Jews, but political prisoners and Russian prisoners of war were forced to do slave labor under terrible conditions. They were tortured. Many, many of them died. And, you know, plantation is a form of concentration camp. I mean that's what we're celebrating when we, I mean I love the live oaks as much as anybody does, I don't

know if you've been to the South, there's something very haunting about live oaks, but you don't have to go to a plantation to see the live oaks. There are some wonderful ones in the Louis Armstrong Park in New Orleans if you want to have your fill of live oak. So last thing, but this is now a subject of conversation, and it wasn't, plantations were places to hold wedding ceremonies or stay at a bed and breakfast.

42:58 Susan Neiman: I knew that I was going to have to write a chapter in this book on reparations, and I left it next to last because I really wasn't sure what I thought. But if any of you here, or those of you who are writers here will know that you'll often write to figure out what you think. And I was very much of two minds because several people who I take very seriously, also African American scholars like Cornel West and Adolph Reid had come out very strongly against reparations. They were arguing that we really need social democracy and reparations muddies the picture. Well, I'm in favor of social democracy too. I am fortunate to live on a continent where things like health care and education and parental leave and vacations and labor rights are considered to be rights and not benefits, and that makes all the difference in the world in how they're treated. So I would be in favor of social democracy in this country myself. Bernie Sanders is actually to the right of Angela Merkel. Seriously, and Angela Merkel is a conservative government. Her, the social policies, just people have become so deeply convinced that these things are matters of rights that it goes quite a bit farther than any American politician would dream of suggesting. But I started thinking, so what if, as a thought experiment, a Holocaust survivor who chose to stay in Germany, and some did, not very many but some did, would have the same social rights as any other German, wouldn't we think they were owed more? And I decided I have to argue for the justice of reparations to African Americans.

45:06 Susan Neiman: I don't have a better plan than anybody else does about exactly how it's supposed to work. I think this is something that economists and working together perhaps with philosophers and other people, need to work out. But when I wrote that chapter last August I thought, oh boy, have you gone out on a limb. It's you and Ta-Nehisi Coates and, you know, people who have been reading this so far and saying, okay, she's got a point, maybe we need to things, oh, no, now she's gone too far. I didn't dream that we would in half a year have five presidential candidates discussing the subject or that the House [of Representatives] would finally, after refusing to do it for 30 years, hold hearings on the fact. And, again, I think all of this is really, this is the silver lining in this horrible presidency that Americans really are coming to terms. We've gone a long way to go, but I think people are open. Before we talk about what needs to be done in this country in the long run, I want to talk about what needs to be done right now. I think we will be processing and atoning for the Trump presidency as the sort of, you know, the endpoint of a horrible history. We'll be processing it for some time. But there's something we have to do first. I'm assuming but I'm happy to explain if you don't,

especially the younger people, are there people here who don't know what Freedom Summer was? Or what, um, who James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner were?

47:06 Susan Neiman: I'm glad you all know. Ah, you don't all know. Okay, so really briefly, in the early [19]60s, a brilliant community organizer who also happened to study philosophy at Harvard, and was Barack Obama's inspiration for going into community organizing, named Bob Moses decided it's fine to desegregate lunch counters and forms of transportation, but what really needs to happen is to make sure that African Americans in the South are voting. Because there's a huge population who have been intimidated and aren't registered to vote, and there's a whole series of practices that are, um, you know, not just prejudice, they're state-sponsored ways in which African Americans are prevented from voting. So Moses leaves Harvard and goes to Mississippi, which he called the heart of the iceberg, and he begins trying to encourage community leaders, brave people in the field, to register to vote. They get beaten to the point of being crippled, several of them are murdered, and Moses is feeling quite horrible about all the campaign for the voter registration drive has brought is death and terror to African American families. So he has this idea of Freedom Summer which is, was that, you know, if a thousand white college students come down from other places, and I know some of them came from California, if a thousand white college students come down to register voters, surely people, the nation's eyes will be focused on this problem and surely the Klan won't dare to kill them.

49:16 Susan Neiman: In fact, they did. They killed, Andrew Goodman was a New York Jewish college student, 20 years old, on his very first day in Mississippi, and he was murdered along with James Chaney, a local young African-American, and Michael Schwerner, who had finished college and had gone down a little earlier than the rest of the students. And I asked because I was dismayed recently at how few young people under 35 or so actually know who these people were. Because I grew up in the South, they were my heroes. I was too young to join Freedom Summer but gosh do I wish I had been there. And I've been shocked recently to see how their memory has been forgotten, but I am simply throwing out that the most important thing that college students and young people can do for the next year is to fight voter suppression because the Republicans will not win unless they continue to manage to suppress poor and minority voters. Now, this was an idea that came to me if, okay, my people reading my book, what, is there something I can use if I have a platform? And I don't yet have, I'm just throwing it out to everybody I talk to. I did find out there is an Andrew Goodman Foundation that his parents founded, that is exactly devoted to this, and people like Bob Moses is actually, and Harry Belafonte are on the board. So there is an organization if you're interested.

- 51:20 Susan Neiman: I am working on doing what I can to support them and further that and see what other kinds of initiatives, 'cause a lot of my friends in this country teach on college campuses where they complain to me, the students care about social justice, but they're often focused on niche campus questions. And those are important questions, I don't mean to denigrate them, but they're not urgent. And what is urgent is to do this. Bryan Stevenson said something very moving to me when I was interviewing him. He said, it's very important that we remember the terror, that we remember the murders and the lynchings, but we also need to remember our heroes. He said there are white Southerners who were against slavery and against lynching, and you don't know their names, and it's really important that we know their names. And this is the other thing, you know, if you're thinking about new understandings of our national history, people like the Newt Gingrich's of the world who say it's gonna tear up our national fabric and we won't have anything to be proud of and we won't have any national identity. Well, we can rewrite a new one. Obama did give the families of these three heroes, posthumously, the Medal of Freedom. But by starting a voter drive what we're both doing is remembering genuine American heroes, people who were, stood up and gave their lives for another vision of America.
- 53:14 Susanne Hillman: Please join me to thank Susan Neiman for a very stimulating talk.
- 53:20 [Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil / October 3, 2019]
- 53:27 [Featuring Susan Neiman / Director, Einstein Forum / Potsdam, German]
- 53:33 [Presented by / The Holocaust Living History Workshop / Deborah Hertz, Director, The Jewish Studies Program, UC San Diego / Susanne Hillman, Program Coordinator, The Holocaust Living History Workshop]
- 53:38 [UC San Diego Library / The Audrey Geisel University Librarian, Erik Mitchell / Director of Communications and Engagement, Nikki Kolupailo]
- 53:42 [UCTC / Producers, Lynn Burnstan / Camera Operators, Marci Bretts, John Menier / Editor, John Menier / Post-Production Supervisor, Mike Weber]
- 54:37 [The views, contents, and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the University of California]
- 53:55 [Read Write Think Dream / The Library Channel UC San Diego / www.uctv.tv/library-channel]
- 54:00 [uctv / University of California Television / www.uctv.tv / ©2019 Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.]