# Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Elizabeth Alexander

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Dr. Elizabeth Alexander, where I ask her, What should we make of America's monuments? Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness, as it always is. We have an incredible guest this week, so let's dive in. Welcome to the show Dr. Elizabeth Alexander, a prize winning and New York Times bestselling author, renowned poet, educator, scholar and cultural advocate. She is president of the Mellon Foundation, the nation's largest funder in the arts, culture, and humanities. Her new book *The Trayvon Generation* explores the power of art and culture to illuminate America's unresolved problem with race and the challenges facing young Black America. We're asking today, what stories do America's monuments tell? Elizabeth, welcome to the show. How are you doing this morning?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:01:05] I'm doing great. It's a sunny day in New York City and I've been looking forward to talking with you for a long time.

**JVN** [00:01:12] Oh, my gosh. Well, we've also been looking forward to making this happen. We also recently got to record an episode with Professor Sabrina Strings about the racial origins of fatphobia, and in that episode we got to talk a lot about visual art and specifically, like, paintings and how paintings through history represent certain body ideals of the time and how that's shifted as time has gone on. And it got us thinking about kind of a different type of visual representation, which is monuments. For me, it's, like, Charlottesville. It's what happened there. But we've also seen that type of tension and flare happen around monuments several times in our history. So we want to kind of explore the associations and significance of monuments throughout our history. We also got to source some questions from our listeners, and one of them is from Lauren here in Austin, where I am. And she asked, I'd love to hear what distinguishes monuments within the greater concept of art.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:02:07] I would start by saying that what I think are important about monuments is that they are all around us, they are in public spaces, they are often free of charge to go and visit them. They teach us all the time what our story is. And I'm going to talk about that “our,” who comes within that “our” in this. And for now, we're going to talk in the United States context, because as we know, the “our” is gorgeously multifocal. You know, the United States is made up of incredible experiences, people, places, origins, points of view, all of it. But a small number of our stories, I think, are being told in our public spaces, in our monuments. I think what you also see with conventional monuments is that they are often made of stone, they're made of steel. They are larger than human beings are. So if you think about Mount Rushmore, if you think about the Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, the human figures that are represented, you know, often presidents, Confederate heroes, and others are many, many, many, many times larger than any living human being.

So what does that mean that you should feel in the presence of that? Well, for sure, small, humble, perhaps afraid, depending on who you are and what is being represented. Do you feel that the, the monument is accessible or are you meant to worship it in some kind of way? Are you invited to interact with it in some kind of way? Is it a single person giving us the idea that history moves with single, often white men moving us perhaps on a horse? If you see a war memorial, is that exactly how history happens or does history happen a lot of different ways? So, so just to give a sense of, you know, when we're not even thinking about it and we're walking around, the monuments are doing their work on us. And I think it's very important to pause and say, what are we being taught? What are we being asked to feel? What is being venerated? What is being lifted up? And from there to say, what are the stories that we haven't heard? When you go to that zone of what are the stories we haven't heard? I think there are actually all kinds of ways in which the people who are not remembered in monuments made of stone and steel still carry our history and our stories.

So I think what that opens up that we'll talk about more is what can a monument be? Can it be a poem? Can it be a performance? Can it be a vernacular roadside memorial at the base of a tree that strangers tend when they go by? How do we hold our stories? How do we remember? How do we say, “This is who we are,” in a way that is not only about us taking care of our own history, but saying, “We offer this history because it's part of the ‘we,’ part of the larger ‘we.’” In starting to think more and more deeply about monuments and looking at the disproportion of who is represented. So, for example, one of the things that we learned with some research that at the Mellon Foundation we sponsored from an incredible group run by Paul Farber in Philadelphia called Monuments Lab, is that there's no one place to go where we could say, “Okay, duh duh duh duh, you know, women, how many monuments and where. You know, duh duh duh duh monuments to movements. Where? Duh duh duh duh Native American monuments.” There is no one place that you can go. So they've been amalgamating the ability to find this stuff.

But in early days, you probably won't be surprised that, for example, women are vastly underrepresented. And when women are represented in monument forms, it is very often in the form of fictional characters like Alice in Wonderland, mermaids, you know, fairies, women idealized as magical creatures, as opposed to women who actually lived and were historical actors. If you look racially at the breakdown of who do we find in our monuments. Vastly, vastly majority white, much smaller proportion, African-American, LatinX, Asian, American native. It goes down to the minuscule 0.00 points. So what I think is exciting, what I think is the, is the opportunity, and what we're trying to do with our monuments project at the Mellon Foundation is say, “There are a whole lot of stories out here. There are a whole lot of people out here. So we are going to support the enriching of the monuments landscape with a broader definition of what a monument can be.” Because I also think, like, they should be beautiful, they should be interesting. I mean, you know, like, big stone horses rearing back with military uniforms. You know, there's a lot of other stuff to look at, a lot of other ways that human beings look. And so many stories that remain. So that's just sort of an overall broad kind of entrance to the zone.

**JVN** [00:07:59] I'm from this little town called Quincy, Illinois. The Lincoln-Douglas debates took place in Quincy. So there's this, like, big monument of, like, that debate taking place, like in our center square. It's not as gigantic as, you know, monuments that you would see in D.C. or like in New York City. But it definitely was, like, you know, grand for us, like, locally. And it was seen as this like source of pride that, like, this debate happened in Quincy. And so I think that this idea that, you know, when you go to a monument or when you see this, like, sculpture outside or, like, in a monument setting, like, you need to be respectful and kind of, like, quiet and like, reflective. It's like you learn early that it's like you should be respectful when you're, like, in these places, but it's like to what are you respecting and what history are you revering? And then another thing that I was thinking is, is that the difference between, like, local monuments and, like, federal or like larger ones. Like, when I think of, like, Columbus Circle in New York City or, like, any of them in Washington, D.C.. I went to Washington, D.C. with my family when I was, like, nine and it was, like, a huge deal to go there for the first time. And I guess in, like, the Vietnam War Memorial, like, you do see more of, like, the individual but you see volume, which I think is maybe a little bit more representative of larger scale monuments.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:09:16] I grew up in Washington, D.C. and that kind of looming formal monument was, it was a part of it part of growing up. And I think that, that when the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was built, it really shifted the paradigm tremendously. And what I think was so deep about it is that you didn't have figurative war heroes. Rather, it was asking us to think about the cost of war. It was asking us also to understand war as not being about a few leaders, but rather about the thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of people who serve in wars and in this case, who lose their lives. And so, you know, I think even if you think about how most monuments you look up and in this one, there's a slash that goes down into the ground. And when you experience it, you walk down into the ground, you do not look up. So physically already you're feeling a very different way than when your neck is craned back to see this mighty thing.

And there's a combination, as you know, when you go to that monument, of seeing people who perhaps, you know, didn't lose anyone in the war. But our understanding in the infinite numbers, what what what the cost was. And you have people who are going and putting their hands to the names and finding the names of their people. Of people who, who they lost in their families. So it's a very emotional experience to go there because the space invites you to have an emotional engagement and not merely stand back in awe that is not activating. And of course, you know, that memorial was made by Maya Lin, an Asian-American woman who at the time that she made it, was very, very young. She was in college when she won a contest to make that memorial. So I think that just simply that act to say, "We're going to have *this* person remember *this* war," that was, you know, in some ways the first war in American history where resistance to war and, and, and measuring the cost of war sort of moved widely throughout the society. So I think that's a very, a very deep kind of thing.

What I also think is interesting in the, in the Washington monuments is, is with the Lincoln Memorial. That, you know, people will sometimes “activate” these monuments. And I love seeing when that happens. I love seeing when people you know, you talked about monuments that you lived with. When people say, “Well, okay, this is a part of the landscape and I'm going to, I'm going to do what I think is important here.” So Marian Anderson is not allowed to sing at DAR, Daughters of the American Revolution, Constitution Hall because she's Black. Where does she go? She goes to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and famously sings what? “My Country Tis Of Thee.” Whoa. Okay, so now there's a whole 'nother purpose. It's a stage. It's a theater for an important resistance to segregation. And in singing that song, what is America? The Black woman singing is telling us what America is. Or if we move forward to the March on Washington. Dr. King's “I Have a Dream” speech took place at the Lincoln Memorial, along with so many other speeches, along with just thinking about voice and song, Mahalia Jackson.

**JVN** [00:12:59] I don't know why, I'm so dense, especially after, like, I didn't put that together. I've been to the Lincoln Memorial. That's where that happened.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:13:09] That's where that happened!

**JVN** [00:13:10] Duh!

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:13:11] That's where that happened! So now I think, though, I mean, but, you know, we just got to talk about it because I think that now that space is not only imbued with another history, where “the people” really, like, “the people” have shown us how to use our spaces and how to, if you will, revise our history, you know, to live our history in these spaces so that it's never going to be simply a static Abraham Lincoln. It's always going to be a space where people try to move racial justice forward, where Black people try to move racial justice forward. So that gets, that gets interesting. The thing that, that I'm especially concerned about is the preponderance of Confederate memorials, not only in the South, but throughout the United States, and very, very crucially, many of those Confederate monuments were erected decades and decades and decades and decades *after* the Confederates lost the Civil War. So we have to then say, “Okay, you know, if a military base is named for a Confederate and the Confederates lost the war, and this is a place where people are trained to excel in military, number one, ‘Why you putting people who didn't excel as the name of the whole place?’ And then number two, ‘What does it stand for?’” And what it stands for now is white supremacy. So that's where I think it's very important with monuments to get to the question of, you know, sometimes it's not benign what's being said. And I think we have to think about that.

**JVN** [00:14:58] So this gets me into kind of where I was going to go next. Your new book, The Trayvon Generation, explores America's unresolved problem with race. And one thing that I think about is, like, coming from, you know, this rural place in Illinois, we were, like, 5 hours southwest of Chicago, but we were in the Civil War, considered, like, “the North,” and we were also, like, part of the Underground Railroad. So I remember, like, being a kid and, you know, hearing those stories and, you know, learning about like the history of slavery, learning about the history, of, like, the Jim Crow era, places like the Lincoln Monument. And actually, what I tend to learn on this very podcast is that, like, he actually took a lot for him to become an abolitionist and he was actually really just a unionist for the first, like, whole half of the Confederacy. And it wasn't until it became, like, politically advantageous for him did he become an abolitionist.

And I think that a lot of those monuments are used by well-intentioned white folks to say, like, “Oh, it's over, it's better now. That was hundreds of years ago.” Well, actually, just as I said that it's, like, well-intentioned my ass. They're trying to, like, wash their hands of, like, this, subvert racism that they play in every single day. So even with monuments that don't seem blatantly racist in the way that, like, a Confederate monument seems more on the head to most people, “Oh, why are we doing that?” Like, posing the questions that you posed, but even going into those, like, the subvert associations for people that, like, you know, what is the Lincoln Memorial and what is the Washington Memorial and what is the Jefferson Memorial that, you know, to me, I went there and, like, revered them. As an adult, I'm like, “Jefferson had, like, enslaved people and, like, wasn't that cool!”

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:16:34] Let me go back first to the question of the kind of single man version of history. If here I'm thinking about the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., which sits across the Tidal Basin. It's in a kind of Monticello-like dome. He sits in the center on his big chair. When I was a kid, I said, “Is that God?” You know, “Is that what God looks like, you know, a big white marble person? It must be, right?” And I think that's how a kid would see it if you had a particular idea, a church-y idea of what God was, which is a whole nother conversation. But I think that the more, then, that we can and some of our work at Mellon is, is supporting what we call the recontextualization of these monuments. How can you tell the history? How can you make it dynamic? How can you what are the ways that if there's a Lincoln Memorial, that you have a Frederick Douglass and a John Brown and a Harriet Tubman. Lincoln didn't end slavery by himself, you know, so what are the movements? What are the gatherings of people? There are so many different ways that creative historians, monument makers, artists are dealing with this whole great big question of contextualization. We supported some fabulous, fabulous AR monuments—

**JVN** [00:17:53] Oooh!

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:17:54] Which we supported with Snapchat in Los Angeles where you can go to a certain place and you take your cell phone. And there are beautifully artist-designed projections where you look through and you can see a whole artist's rendering of a history in a particular place. There are gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous things that folks are doing out there. To the question of Confederates, to kind of, you know, deal with it for, in a big way once and for all for this conversation. Why were they erected after the war was over? They were erected at moments in our history when racial progress was moving forward. They were symbols of white supremacy erected to say, “Stay in your place.” Erected to say that “As the country's values seem to be changing, these values will go up in stone. These figures will demand respect. These figures will assert that they are ‘American’ values.” I love the example of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., which as late as the 1950s put stained glass windows of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, Confederate “heroes.” But I mean, you know, heroes who lost, in the main area, stained glass of the National Cathedral. This is happening in the nation's capital as Brown v Board of Education is making its way through the courts, as the civil rights movement is gearing up.

**JVN** [00:19:30] So they weren't there before and then they put them in?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:19:32] They were not there before. And they put them in, and they put them in the nation's church.

**JVN** [00:19:37] And who is they?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:19:39] They would be the, you know, the congregants of the church and, you know, and the people who run the church.

**JVN** [00:19:48] These hoes have been fucking us up forever! I meant to say “these racists” because I'm sex positive and I love a hoe. I am one. So I just want to say, like, “these racists.”

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:19:58] If I were having another conversation with you, I might be saying that, too. But in this conversation, what I want to say is that the people of, of the congregation said, “These are an impediment to worship.” *They* became self-reflexive. They said, “Why are these here? Why are these here?” And they took them out. And so I think that, you know, it's really important. I'm very heartened by the moments where communities themselves say, “What were we doing?” And name the white supremacy that was put into place in a church, in a place where it never belonged, even if it had been put up during the Civil War, even if it had been put up before the war was lost. A church is an inappropriate place for white supremacy. So I think there's a lot of really, really amazing looking within.

One of our grants that I'm incredibly, incredibly excited about, it's a powerful story, is in Kansas. The Native American people in Kansas, from whom the state got its name, are called the Kaws, K-A-W-S people. And they had a sacred mount in their community. And 75 years ago. The white settlers of Lawrence, Kansas. Took that 23 tonne rock out of the ground and stole it from the Native people to whom it belonged. Moved it to the center of town in Lawrence, Kansas. I kid you not. Posed themselves—the white male founders of the town—around The Mount and said “Our Settler History” in the picture underneath. I mean, imagine, someone says, “I'm going to take the National Cathedral. I'm going to move the National Cathedral because I wanted to tell my own revised history. I'm going to go steal it from these people because I can.” I mean, the audacity. “And then I'm going to rewrite history and I'm going to rewrite history so that the Native people who were there first are no longer there.”

So what I feel so proud about and why I feel so excited about our work is that in recent times, folks from the native community, from Lawrence, from the university, they've come together and they've reckoned with this story. They said, “This is not okay.” The white people have apologized and have said, “We want to return this 23-ton mount.” It costs a lot of money to do that. So what our grant resources are enabling is for it to go back where it was in the first place and for there to be programming and work that tells this story in all its fullness and its richness. And so I think, look, I've always thought, I was a professor for decades and decades and decades teaching African-American culture, African-American history, American culture, American history. And I know that we can know all of these complicated and seemingly contradictory things at the same time. Everybody is just smarter than needing to know that only one story is the story. Everywhere. But also especially in a country that is at its most powerful when we understand its multivocality. And that there's not just one history, there are many histories, and we can tell them simultaneously. And that's what I think is, is really important that, that we do with our monuments work.

**JVN** [00:24:03] So earlier we were talking about, like, that monuments are all around us. And I think that it's important for us to even, like, learn to recognize them more readily. Like, we see, like, presidents on money. We see that, like, when we tried to put, like, Harriet Tubman on the $20 bill, like, that, fucking literally almost keeled over, like–

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:24:19] Yep!

**JVN** [00:24:20] So many. I mean, there was literally such backlash about, like, “You're erasing history or lah lah lah lah lah!” People were just so fucking bothered by that. It was one of the first things that Trump tried to do away with, which I think he, I think he did do.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:25:34] He did do it. We still don't have our Harriet Tubman money. I'm only going to pay with Harriet Tubman money once I have it. I can't wait.

**JVN** [00:24:41] So but, how can we teach people to recognize monuments in their life and to kind of realize that it's not only these, like, huge, you know, single-man-style monuments in Washington, D.C.?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:24:53] Well, I love that. And I think, you know, how can we teach people? Well, first of all, we teach people, right? I mean, so we teach people in classrooms. And this is why, you know, the attack on teaching history is really, really extraordinary. You know, the idea that in our actual classrooms, if you don't say things, you know, if you don't “say ‘gay.’” That somehow you will erase human beings, human experience, human history. I mean, it doesn't work, but it's very destructive while people are trying to do it. So I do think that we’re in a, in a very dangerous moment with actual teaching, with all of the censorship and false narratives that are being encouraged and all of the critical thinking that is being *discouraged* in, in our classrooms. I'm very, very concerned about that. So there's, there's the "teach" teaching that's incredibly important.

But also, I'm interested in the teaching that happens meeting people where they are. So the person who listens to this podcast, you know, what are all of the different places that we listen and learn and get our content? And again, you know, this monuments project, I mean, it's not going to fix everything. But we're devoting a quarter of a billion dollars to it. And it's the biggest, you know, project that we've ever done in Mellon's history. And I think that it's coming at a moment where the zeitgeist is very activated around the question of monuments. So I think that all of the different ways, I love that you mentioned money that our history has taught. It's on money, it's on postage stamps, it's on you know, what gets chosen for the Book of the Month Club? It's, it's taught in representation and billboards and magazine advertisements and our built environment and what our public spaces are named or our high schools are named.

**JVN** [00:26:53] Yes! And even, like, what's in our classrooms because, like, I feel like a really elementary school classroom, we always had like that picture of each president, you know, like along like the top of the wall. It didn't include, like, any, like, Black person until, like, 2008?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:27:11] Nine, formally.

**JVN** [00:27:12] Nine, formally. Thank you, thank you! But yeah, so it's, it's in so many ways that we don't think about the ways that they, like, interact with our psyche. That I think is, like, the first step in recognizing, like, because even when I first discovered this work, I was, like, "monuments…" Like, "monuments…" But it's, like, "Monuments!" It's a really big deal. And I think it's one that people don't really kind of sort out.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:27:36] Well, it is. And I think that to all the other spaces of representation, you know, when you talk about the classrooms, I was remembering my kids are grown now, but when they were little, we had these little, you know, plastic eating mats for their messy little eating that would have all kinds of, you know, different plants, fruits and vegetables, you know, history. And there was one that had the presidents on it. And, you know, at age five, you know, son number two looks at it and says, "Oh! So white men are the only ones who can be president?" Because a five-year-old could see that that was what you see. So then, you know, you have to have that whole conversation, right? Or later with, you know, going a little bit later to visit Monticello with the kids, Thomas Jefferson's home. I remember them saying, you know, when they said, "Thomas Jefferson built this home himself." And they said, "Did he build it with his own hands? This whole house?" You know, like, even a kid, understood, like, "This is kind of big thing for one person to do with their hands. So whose hands built it?" And then when they saw the area Mulberry Row, which was just sort of sticks and stones and we said, "This is where the enslaved people lived." Then again, it took a six-year-old and a seven-year-old to say, "Oh, so from his window he could see," this one kid said, "He could see the slaves slaving." It's, like, "Yes, all day. Every day. He could see the slaves slaving." So, you know, I just think there is so much of an opportunity to use, you know, young people's very basic intelligence about, you know, how you read what's there, what's not there, what makes sense, what doesn't make sense and, and understand the need for us to tell a much, much richer and fuller stories and that everybody can hold them, if you will.

**JVN** [00:29:48] So in your book, The Trayvon Generation, you share the story of Stone Mountain. I love that it's, like, a mountain-heavy podcast, we love volcanoes around here. We love mountains. It's, like, we're obsessed. So can you tell us about Stone Mountain and, like, what the significance of the site is like? When was it constructed? Who constructed it? And, like, why did they make it?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:30:07] Yeah. So Stone Mountain, which sort of looms over Atlanta, 25 minutes from downtown, is the world's largest memorial to the Confederacy, and it is the largest bas-relief sculpture on earth, of any kind. And if you imagine the more familiar Mount Rushmore with the presidents. Faces of the presidents. So, too, Stone Mountain, same artist, actually, there are the faces of Confederates on this huge looming monument that was built over many decades, largely with resources from the members of the Klan, the Ku Klux Klan. That it was a place, may *still* be a place, where members of the Ku Klux Klan have their revels and burn their, you know, crosses and, you know, do their thing. And it is also an active amusement park and recreation center. So, you know, there's amusement park things. There's a train tram that goes up. There are hiking trails, there's a water park aspect to it. It is probably the biggest tourist attraction in the state of Georgia, perhaps in the south, where people go regularly to have fun.

And I learned about it through reading about artists of color, how they responded to it, who are from Georgia, from Atlanta. The poet Adrienne Su, who is Chinese-American, writes a poem and she talks about going with her first generation Chinese family to have fun and not understanding what it was. And then at that moment when she did. She calls it "the shock of delayed comprehension." But they've been asked to enjoy themselves in a space that celebrates white supremacy. And I'm not being hyperbolical. When I talk about, you know, spaces that celebrate white supremacy. That is what their value is. Period. The Confederates lost the war. Anything after the war. And it's not like Robert E. Lee's kids go to Stone Mountain to to, you know, put flowers on their dad's grave. There's, there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Robert E. Lee all around the country in places where he never set foot. So so, you know, some people say, "Oh, this is about people and their own heritage. And we've changed, duh duh duh." And there's no getting around what it stands for and what it stands for out of time.

The poet Natasha Trethewey has written a great deal about coming of age in Mississippi and Atlanta in the sixties and in the seventies. And this is why I think that poets are telling the truth in our poetry and keeping memory and making monuments in our poems, which also last as long as stone does, which I think is really exciting. So Natasha has a poem called "Southern

History” where she writes about “Gone with the Wind” being her history textbook. And being a Black, mixed race girl, learning, “The slaves were actually very happy. They were cared for. They were fed. They were clothed when they were slaves.” And that emancipation, according to this movie, according to this narrative, was not something that was good for them. Their freedom was not good for them. This is what she was taught as a child. In the shadow of Stone Mountain. Right?

So I think with the shock of delayed comprehension, to use Su's phrase, I love it so much because that's what, you know, when, when you talk about rethinking your childhood. I talk about rethinking my childhood. You know, all we know when we're kids is that it's big and it's important. But I think we can teach kids another way. To understand the depth of the meaning and to also offer responses. So what I think is neat about Stone Mountain is another artist, Kara Walker, African-American painter who grew up there as well—and who said she would never return because that was such a traumatic sight—made a piece at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta put up to face Stone Mountain, if you will. I mean, it's not like literally face to face, but to show the nightmare, the horrors of of antebellum America. So I'm really interested in the ways that artists are talking back and giving us a richer, deeper way to understand our history.

**JVN** [00:35:12] With Stone Mountain is the explicit nature of the mountain that it's literally fucking statues of Confederate leaders and then it's obscured for passerbys because, like, they're, like, asked to just, like, go have a fun day at the park. They're, like, no matter. It's like, “If you want to go to the biggest funnest park in Georgia, you're gonna have to go do it, like, under the watchful gaze of a bunch of fucking confederates”?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:35:33] You said it, right there. And again, like, not even statues, they’re in the mountain. They're—, like, like Mount Rushmore. Their faces are in the mountain carved into the mountain.

**JVN** [00:35:43] And what do we go to Mount Rushmore for? To go, like, pay respect, to these fucking guys. So obviously, that's what it's for in Stone Mountain.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:35:53] And also, by the way, the story of Mt. Rushmore is that is stolen Native land.

**JVN** [00:35:58] Right.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:35:59] And that of the presidents who are represented, you know, there are also embedded within that the stories of removing Native people from their land. That that's what happened on those presidents’ watches.

**JVN** [00:36:14] So they’re both fucked up, it doesn’t matter! Like, they’re both fucked up!

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:36:16] Yeah, yeah, but I think there's so much that can be done to to, to teach around it. So that's what I like about, you know, the Kara Walker. And then, you know, Natasha Trethewey once said, like, "I think if you sandblasted it and left a scar, that would be the story." Or what would it be, you know, there's—, I'm actually going to visit Stone Mountain this weekend because I need to see and there's a museum, you know, I'll go to see what story is in the museum. There are a lot of things that you can do with the teaching spaces that surround. You could commission other artists to make responsive works around. I mean, there are so you know, I think sometimes I do think that removal is the answer because I think removal when communities say, "This is harming us." You know, there was a Confederate, a small statue of a very hateful man, Nathan Bedford Forrest, that was in the middle of Selma, Alabama, which is a very, almost completely Black community, outside of the high school.

And pretty recently, Selma had its first Black mayor. First time in history. And the Black mayor said, "I don't want this white supremacy with my kids going into high school every day. No." And there was a huge, huge kerfuffle with some white residents of the town who said it was, you know, "sacrilegious." And eventually what happened was that it was moved to a Confederate cemetery, which seemed to me like, "Okay, good, y'all can have it with the rest of them over there." But I have been to that Confederate cemetery, and it is chilling to see how well-tended it is. I would love a Confederate cemetery to be a place that was choked with weeds and neglect because the idea had no currency and did not deserve tending. But this is one of the prettiest places in Selma because folks are taking care of it and not just because it's their great grandfathers. At least it’s not in front of the high school.

**JVN** [00:38:25] Also like my friend ALOK would say it's, like, you have to take conversations into spaces where it might be uncomfortable and, like, where, like, it probably won't go over well and just like workshop it. So I think it's kind of just, like, for those of us that are white, we just need to, like, it might be clunky and it might feel weird. But if you're having these conversations with people and they say, like, "Get off it, or, you know, that was 150 years ago," it's, like, to your point that you were saying earlier, it's like, "No, let's think about it." The Confederacy lost. They were fighting for slavery. Then after they lost, these monuments were erected in the middle of Jim Crow. As Black and brown people were fighting for equal rights. That means that they were espousing and holding dear the values of the people that lost that war. It wasn't the people that they were super holding close. It was the values and, like, what was considered acceptable at the time that they were holding closed. And that's something that we need to dig up, not *we*, but, like, people need to dig in more on because that's really what monuments are is, like, celebrating that time, or at least that's what we were taught.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:39:28] All of us need to examine our power and privilege and need to do the work of repairing what we can and being open to learning all the time. Learning, learning, learning. Not, not sit in our smugness. And I think that one of the great benefits of being a woman, being a person of color, being, you know, a queer person, being anybody who is outside of conventional power, means that you have to read the mainstream very carefully sometimes in order to stay alive. And so I think that that means that, you know, you have to understand mainstream narratives and understand mainstream history as well as carry forth your own and think about how you move in those spaces where you want to feel safe and empowered and respected. And so I think that, you know, sitting in that position, you know, tells me, “Yes, it's challenging, yes, it's hard. But, like, we can listen to each other, we can learn.”

I mean, I taught, you know, for, for over three decades, I taught as a college professor. My classrooms were always mixed because the schools where I taught at, in every single way of background. And it just was very powerful to see young folks saying, “I never knew this. Why wasn't I taught this? I was taught another way.” And I have a way of thinking that says, you know, you can love America and challenge America at the same time. In a relationship you can love and question at the same time. That's the unlearning that has to happen from unlearning unhealthy patriarchy, where it's always, you know, “Because, because dad said.” Well, no, actually, you can respect and love and question at the same time. And this is, I think, what will get us to a richer and healthier and, and a true a true democracy. Further, I think, you know, that, that all of the stories I mean when I think about some things that did happen, so, the AIDS quilt, for example, the idea that a memorial could be made of fabric and could be made by many, many hands and could contain so many stories and could invite us both to mourn but also to have rage and activism to change something.

And why is that quilt on the grass? I mean, and it's in the Mall, in the middle, in that space where so much American protest and marching and, and change and activism has happened. I love, I love that. I love that we're supporting a, you know, a memorialization of all of the Japanese-American people who were interned. You know, American citizens who were interned because they were of Japanese descent. And there hasn't been any gathering of all of their names. Poetry does that, right? You know, visual arts do that. Storytelling does that. But for there to be a place that can be visited, you know, a lot of the work we're doing, there's a, a Chinese American elder center in D.C., and D.C. has a pretty small Chinatown. And those elders who built that Chinatown are quite old right now. So there's a storytelling project, and who knows what those stories will turn into as far as the form of it? But we've got to gather those stories so that we can really have a richer accounting of who we've been, so that we can move forward in a way that we know that we're always simultaneously giving space to the multiple strands of our big “we.”

**JVN** [00:43:40] To that point of what I was saying earlier, because I think that a lot of people are really having this, having this question. And it's a question I struggle with, and it's one that we were kind of just talking about. And I think that for you being, you've been a Black woman in fucking college teaching all these different people. Now you're at the Mellon Foundation. Can we reach out to other people? Does that look like taking risks and maybe reaching out to people that don't look like you?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:44:04] Well, I mean, I think that look, I mean, people have to reach out to each other and people have to do their own work. You know, I think there's not one blanket answer, but I think that that's kind of a pretty good way of being in the world, wanting to connect, but having self-awareness that there are some things that you have to figure out in which community, in which conversation do you need to figure something out and and to be aware, like, what are you asking of people?

**JVN** [00:44:37] So it's kind of one of those things of, like, again, binaries are so 1950, like, it's on a spectrum, honey, you gotta be self-aware because it's, like, a case-by-case basis. So, like, basically if I come into contact with, like, a, like, like a very intense heterosexual white man, honey, even though we're very different, I'm going to try. Like, I'm not going to let it up to people like my dad to try, because if I do that, he's only going to become, like, a tepid Republican at best. Whereas if I try, maybe I can, like, move him further.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:45:07] And I think, so, I believe in reading. And to get back to the, you know, the zone that we're in, what I think is so important about our built environment and about these places where you go to learn about history and you go to learn about other experiences, I dream that all of those spaces would, taken together, reflect the richness and the challenging questions of what's hard about our history and what's beautiful about our history.

**JVN** [00:45:37] So then, to the Mellon Foundation and we've talked about it before, but it's, like, such an important work. Can you just speak as we end up to the power and importance of arts funding?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:45:46] Yes. Well, I think that arts and culture, we're the nation's biggest funder in arts and culture and in the humanities and, you know, the humanities is about “How do we understand who we are as human beings?” Human beings assemble in community. Human beings make songs. Human beings have forever written on the cave walls and drawn pictures and come together to sing songs of who they are that represent their culture. Art is eternal, but making art and making it in a way that it can be protected and shared costs money. And cultural organizations help move that culture to more people. I mean, one of the things that we saw even before the pandemic, but I think which really flourished in the pandemic, is with very little resources and with the gig economy just shut down, so many cultural organizations had to figure out ways that they could share more digitally. Poetry readings online. You know. You know. Public conversations. More digital content. There are so many resources out there. And I think that the more that people experience the transportation that art allows to travel somewhere you've never been. Backwards in history, forwards in history, across the world. To go into the life of a human being. I mean, if you just think about, you know, watch a movie about someone you've never met and never would meet. And if it's beautifully done, you will feel something. Let yourself feel. Art can make us laugh. It can make us cry. It can make us scream. It can make us rage. It can make us learn. It can make us look at ourselves. It is, it has superpowers that are unique and our, our cultures have never existed without art. I don't think they're going to start. But I do think that we have to support it so more people can receive it.

**JVN** [00:48:01] One thing that I thought was really hopeful that you said is that even though there are some monuments that are steeped in, like, racist transmisogyny, misogyny, all sorts of, you know, land stealing, colonialism, like all sorts of not good stuff. There's still a way that we can take what is and shift it, and perspective around it, create more art around it, more education, more learning around preexisting things that are, like, really don't have the connotation and the representation that we need them to have?

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:48:25] Absolutely. And it's happening. It's happening. It's really, really, really, really happening.

**JVN** [00:48:30] And there's also, like, new precedents and possibilities for what monuments can be like. And just more culture, more arts, more songs, more poetry. It's like monuments don't have to be these, like, monolithic stone things that you have to travel to see. Like, we can make monuments right here, right now.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:48:44] That's right. Absolutely.

**JVN** [00:48:47] Ah! You have just been an incredible guest. I'm so grateful for your work and your scholarship and for, like, teaching the adults, including myself, and doing such important work. You are just an incredible person that is just really doing such significant work. Your new book is out. You guys got to read it. We'll put a link to that in the description below. Thank you so much, Dr. Elizabeth Alexander. We appreciate you so much for coming on Getting Curious.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:49:08] Thank you for this beautiful conversation. I appreciate it. And I can't wait to meet you in person one day.

**JVN** [00:49:13] And we appreciate you, even if you hadn't come on Getting Curious. We just really appreciate your work and you have a really great, gorgeous day.

**ELIZABETH ALEXANDER** [00:49:18] Thank you.

**JVN** [00:49:23] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week was Dr. Elizabeth Alexander. You'll find links to her work and the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on our theme music as Freak by Quiñ. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, honey, introduce a friend. Show them how to subscribe. Get them to become a podcast person in the first place. Honey, we sure do appreciate it. Yes, we do. You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter at @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are running curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.