

Scene on Radio

Turning the Lens (Seeing White, Part 1): Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-31-turning-the-lens-seeing-white-part-1/>

John Biewen: I'm minding my own business one day, looking in on my Facebook feed. It's the summer of 2016, in the frenzy of the campaign season, a few weeks after Donald J. Trump got enough delegates to clinch the Republican nomination. Someone's posted a video clip from the daytime talk show, *The View*. The headline is about the comedian and actor D.L. Hughley and something he said on the show. It snags my interest, and I click.

[Hughley clip, *The View*]

[Applause]

Joy Behar: Let's talk about politics. We often talk about Trump. Did you even think that he would get this far?

Hughley: But I'm not shocked that he is. Because I think that ultimately America is aspirational. Like to me, Obama is what we would like to be. Donald Trump and his supporters are what we are.

Sherri Shepherd: Heeey. You right.

Hughley: Listen. We want to be different, like we'll put Harriet Tubman on the front of a twenty-dollar bill, but leave Andrew Jackson on the back. So we got a slave on the front, a slave owner on the back. So even when Black people are on money we still gotta supervise 'em." [Laughter]

John Biewen: The last bit is funny. But it was the part before that that stopped me in my tracks. This bit.

Hughley: Obama is what we would like to be. Donald Trump and his supporters are what we are.

John Biewen: I have to admit, my reaction at the time was, hold on a second. First of all, Obama won the whole shebang. Twice. Trump's gonna be the nominee for one party but the whole country hasn't elected him to anything yet, and it won't happen. You may remember that's what most people thought at the time. Besides that, I bristled at Hughley's "we." I know, it's "we the people" and all that, but when you put it in a sentence like this?

Hughley: Donald Trump and his supporters are what we are.

John Biewen: Wasn't sure I wanted to be implicated in *that* "we."

Of course, Trump did win, say what you like about the perfect series of gusts that blew him across the finish line: Hillary's emails, Vladimir Putin, James Comey, Jill Stein's voters, the electoral college. Trump won. And as for that "we," it seems fair to say that D.L. Hughley, who's Black, was talking about a nation, for all its growing diversity, a nation still dominated by people who look not like him but like me. Seventy percent of voters were white in 2016, and 58 percent of white voters chose Trump. Thus the Van Jones election night comment that went viral.

Van Jones, CNN: This was a white-lash. This was a white-lash against a changing country, it was a white-lash against a Black president, in part. And that's the part where the pain comes.

John Biewen: People can debate how big a factor straight-up racism was in Trump's victory. But his year-long drumbeat of remarks and tweets and retweets, giving voice to white resentment toward people of color and religious minorities, offending millions and pulling scabs off old American wounds – all of that was not too much for the 62,984,825 people who colored in the bubble next to Trump's name.

[Music]

John Biewen: The rise of Trump is just one of the many things in the last few years that have turned a newly challenging, just-what-is-up-with-you-all spotlight on white people and whiteness. Do I need to list them? From the many police shootings of unarmed Black people, to the massacre of nine Black churchgoers by the white supremacist terrorist Dylan Roof, to cultural stuff like Oscars So White.

Chris Rock: Well I'm here at the Academy Awards. Otherwise known as the White People's Choice Awards. [Laughter]

John Biewen: And what feels like a relentless drip, drip, month by month, of glimpses into the everyday of American life, moments not meant for public consumption but captured on smart phones and sent ricocheting around the internet. The manhandling of Black teenage girls by white cops and school cops. Those college kids in Oklahoma:

TV announcer: ...fraternity brothers seen on video engaging in a racist chant.

Students singing: There will never be a nigger SAE. There will never be a nigger SAE. You can hang 'em from a tree but they'll never sign with me....

John Biewen: Or this one, in the town where I live, Durham, North Carolina: after a near-accident on a busy road, a man with brown skin stops his car to apologize, and records the fury of a middle-aged white woman in a nice, late-model sedan.

Man: Calm down, ma'am. Ma'am, Ma'am, please relax...

Woman: RELAX?!

Man: Relax, I'm sorry, I did not see you.

Woman: You better open up your goddamn eyes and learn how to drive, you f*cking Muslim. You are a Muslim, aren't you?

Man: Yes ma'am, proud.

Woman: I goddamn knew it. Son of a nigger-loving atheist bitch. Get offa me!

Man: I feel sorry for you, that you're full of hatred.

John Biewen: I'm John Biewen, it's *Scene on Radio*. The "race" beat in American journalism usually involves pointing our gaze, and our cameras and microphones, at people of color. That goes for me, too. Over several decades as a reporter and documentary maker, I've told the stories of Black folk from Chicago to the Mississippi Delta. Latinos from North Carolina to the apple orchards of Washington State. Native Americans from the Navajo Nation in the southwest to Ojibwe country up north. I'm proud of a lot of that work, but if I think about how I built those stories, I've often treated whiteness like the proverbial elephant in the room. You might hear about some white individuals or white-run institutions, the alleged bad apples, the discriminators. But like most American reporters, I've usually left white people as a group—the white "race"—unnamed.

In the coming batch of episodes, a series we call *Seeing White*. Turning the lens around, looking straight at white America – and at the notion of whiteness itself. Where did this idea of a white race come from? God? Nature? Or is it man-made? And if somebody manufactured the idea, why, for what purpose? How has the meaning of white changed over the centuries, and how does it function now? The stories that we carry around about whiteness and what it means—stories we may not even know we're carrying, but we are, all of us—are those stories true?

Colbert: For the record, I am white. I am about the whitest boy you're ever gonna meet.

John Biewen: Stephen Colbert, talking to his show's bandleader, Jon Batiste.

Colbert: John, have you met anybody whiter than me?

Jon Batiste: Yeah, I think I know somebody.

Colbert: Yeah? Who? Who?

Batiste: It's a guy I grew up with.

Colbert: What's his name?

Batiste: His name's Andy.

Colbert: Oh, I know Andy.

Batiste: You know Andy?

Colbert: Yeah, the white guy?

Batiste: Yeah.

Colbert: Yeah, we meet at the white meeting. Yeah, I know Andy. [Laughter]

John Biewen: I'm at least as white as Colbert. Even my hair, which used to be the color of his, was in a hurry to turn white. So that means I'm well-positioned for this project. I've got the credentials, the inside scoop on the whole white thing. [Pause.] Right?

[Phone dialing and ringing.]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hello.

John Biewen: Chenjerai Kumanyika?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. Who's this?

John Biewen: It's John Biewen.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey John, what's going on? How you doing?

John Biewen: I'm all right. You?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm good, man.

John Biewen: So, I'm doing this this crazy project looking at whiteness.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Uh-oh.

John Biewen: And I'm just not sure, I'm not sure I'm the right person for the job. I'm a little concerned about my perspective as a white dude and thinking I might, I maybe could use some backup, somebody to kind of check me a little bit, and help flesh out the story with your perspective as a person of color in this world. What do you think?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. You're not asking me to speak for all people of color, are you?

John Biewen: Yes! Of course.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: OK, great. Because that's what I do. All right. [Laughter]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey, my name is Chenjerai Kumanyika. I'm a professor of critical cultural media studies, cultural industries, and things like that. Currently I teach at Clemson University in the Department of Communications. In the fall of 2017 I'll be starting in Rutgers School of Communication and Information.

John Biewen: Chenjerai will make regular appearances in this series. People who study this stuff often say that white people ourselves are not very good at seeing whiteness. On the contrary, we tend to have blind spots large and small about the way it all works. And actually, Chenjerai won't have to speak for all people of color because as you'll see quite a few POCs will show up in the episodes. He can just speak for his smart and thoughtful self.

For this introduction, Chenjerai and I put some thoughts and worries on the table about the series itself.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I like the focus on whiteness, because I feel like in general when we're talking about race and ethnicity the focus tends to be on, you know, people

of color, and whiteness just kind of is invisible. So I like that. But you know there's like a couple of things I'm concerned about, when you say it right off the gate there's a couple of things that just come up like, "Oh I hope we don't go in this direction."

John Biewen: Right. Tell me.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well this is the, I'll tell you the big thing is this. There's a tendency in this country to frame the discussion about race and ethnicity and oppression in terms of something called "race relations." And this just overwhelmingly focuses on the individual attitudes of people, almost like race, racism is like this disease and the overwhelming puzzle to solve is, who has it?

John Biewen: Yeah, right. Exactly. That's how we think about it, isn't it. And how are people, how are we getting along? Are we being nice to each other?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. Yeah. How are we getting along. I mean it's incredible to me how many like really intelligent people will still frame this issue like that. I've seen Obama do it, you know, and I think the thing that these conversations really need is something that people are deeply illiterate with, is this issue of structural racism or institutionalized patterns of exploitation and oppression that are like racialized in certain ways. You know, and really just a more complex engagement with how power works and what race and ethnicity has to do with it. You know this is to me almost distinct from this problem of – it's not distinct I guess – but almost distinct from 'race relations' and 'prejudice.' And so I really have a problem with people framing like that. In fact, John, if I can, I want to deputize you as a white person to go out into the world and like sort of intervene when you see people framing it like that.

John Biewen: But yes, I hear you. Power. How does power work, how do systems, and there's an idea that people have talked about that you can have racism without individual racists, because systems and structures have been set up in a way that they just run this way on their own at this point.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right!

John Biewen: Or at least that's a thesis to be looked at.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. I mean, I think that's more worrisome in a way, right? It's not just when you have like the person who we all know is a bigot, but actually when you can have a system where people are not, they don't have those attitudes but somehow they can be incentivized to participate in a system of oppression. That's what I'm more worried about.

John Biewen: I have a worry too and a disclaimer that I would want to make about this project. And that is, I'm concerned that people will look at the title of the series, *Seeing White*, and they'll think, 'Oh this is a series about white supremacists and neo-Nazis and the KKK again.'

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

John Biewen: And I want people to know that that's not what we're up to here.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Please. Please.

John Biewen: Those folks are having their moment but it's not going to be on this show. I mean, who knows, there might be some overt racism that gets referred to and so on, but mostly what we want to talk about is, you know, the rest of us who are not overtly, stated white supremacists, and sort of how things go down among the rest of us.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, I'm 100 percent in support of that. It's hard because there is, it is appalling when you see some of these crazy examples of bigotry. And now people coming into explicit white supremacy and you know white nationalism and things

like that. But the thing I'm much more interested in is the kind of whiteness that's just institutionalized, it's there, you know, just in the everyday—well here I go—everyday interactions. But also, you know, just patterns and how institutions are set up and all these other kinds of things.

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Who has what rights, how resources are distributed. Those things are just sort of ingrained with us. They're invisible, like the water that we're in. And that's what I'm more interested in.

John Biewen: That's our challenge, to go on this journey together and see if we can get a little better at seeing the water. Next time we'll get into it, by going back in time. Quite a ways back. Back to the days when, though there were people who looked like me, there's no sign they thought of themselves as white.

Nell Irvin Painter: There WAS no notion of race. [Laughs] People could look at other people and see some people were lighter and some people were darker, but what did that mean? What did that mean?

John Biewen: The invention of a tribe, next time.

The editor for our *Seeing White* series is Loretta Williams. You can follow *Scene on Radio* on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). The website is [SceneonRadio.org](#). By all means subscribe to the show on your favorite podcatcher, and give us a rating and review so that little algorithm kicks in and iTunes puts the show in front of more eyeballs. Music by Lucas Biewen and his old man. The show comes to you from the [Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University](#).