

Scene on Radio
How Race Was Made (*Seeing White*, Part 2): Transcript

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John Biewen: And maybe, you know, of course your book starts thousands of years ago...

Nell Irvin Painter: Yeah.

John Biewen: But here's a thought I had about the starting point, which is, when I was in high school, in Minnesota in the late 1970s, I can still remember very vividly in my social studies textbook, the three races of man.

Nell Irvin Painter: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

John Biewen: And I can see the images of the Mongoloid, the Caucasoid, and the Negroid. It was presented as a scientific, biological fact.

Nell Irvin Painter: That's right, that's right.

John Biewen: Sort of like, you know, there's certain kinds of rocks and here's the map of the world and then these are the three races. [Painter: Yeah.] So, um, is it a scientific, biological fact?

Nell Irvin Painter: [laughs]

[Music]

Painter: The three races – in the order usually presented, Caucasoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid, Caucasoid at the top – is not a biological fact, and only became science, in the sense of anthropologists said that this is true, in the 1940s.

John Biewen: That's Nell Irvin Painter – historian, Princeton Professor Emerita, and author of *The History of White People*. I'm John Biewen, it's *Scene on Radio*. Welcome to Part Two of our series, *Seeing White*. Looking at the past and present of whiteness, in the world and especially the United States. Where this idea of being white came from, and what it's for.

[Music]

John Biewen: In this episode, we're going back – well, not really to the beginning. Science now tells us that in the beginning of the human story, people evolved in Africa from one common ancestor, a couple hundred thousand years ago. We're all kin, and all African, if you just go back far enough. Over time, some people walked out of Africa and spread across the world. The branches of the family that spent thousands of years in colder places without a lot of sun, they lost much of their melanin and turned a bunch of different shades, depending on the conditions where they were. That's how we became a species ranging from the darkest brown to the lightest pink-beige, and everything in between, shades of brown with an array of yellowish and reddish tinges.

All of that explains why people look different. It does not explain the wildly inconsistent and ever-changing groupings that people have concocted over the last few centuries. It doesn't explain my high school textbook.

Suzanne Plihcik: So we believe we need to know how we got this thing called race, if we're gonna understand racism.

John Biewen: Suzanne Plihcik is with the [Racial Equity Institute](#). The team is based in Greensboro, North Carolina, but travels the country doing anti-racism workshops. I recorded Suzanne and her colleagues a few months ago in Charlotte. REI's courses are not "diversity training." Their approach is not kumbaya, let's get along, let's tolerate one another. Instead, they drop a whole lot of knowledge – especially history but also sociology, biology....

Suzanne Plihcik: We know, for example, since the human genome project, that we are what percentage genetically the same as human beings? 99-point-what? Nine. 99.9 genetically the same. There is more genetic variation in a flock of penguins than there is in the human race. There is more genetic variation *within* groups that have come to be called races than there is *across* groups that have come to be called races. Statistically likelier that I am closer to you genetically--

John Biewen: Suzanne, who is white, points at a Black man.

Suzanne Plihcik: ...than I am to you –

John Biewen: And then a white woman.

Suzanne Plihcik: Anthropologists finally say, and it is way past due, that race is anthropological nonsense.

Is that the same thing as saying it's not real? No. No, because it's real. It is powerfully real. It's politically and socially real. So we need to know, how did we get it. And what we say is, we constructed it.

John Biewen: To tell the story of the construction of race, and therefore of whiteness, let's go back to the beginnings of Western civilization. Why? Well, because of course it's Westerners who would come to call themselves white. But also because Westerners would become the inventors, eventually, of race as we know it.

Nell Irvin Painter: We go back to Greece because that's where we think of as our cultural beginnings.

John Biewen: And in ancient Greece, says Nell Painter...

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?

[Music]

Greeks, notably Herodotus, 5th century B.C. – Herodotus traveled. We don't know that he actually traveled to all the places that he talked about, but he did talk about what was then the known world, his known world. And he did not use the word race, but he talked about how people live. Where people live. The climate. Is the air humid or dry? Is the landscape hilly or flat? Is there a lot of water around? *How* do the people live? Do they live on horseback, do they walk around? And how do they look?

They could see differences in skin color. So, for instance, “Ethiopian” comes from “burnt skin.” Actually, Herodotus thought that the Ethiopians were the handsomest people in the world, kind of as an aside.

John Biewen: So, if race didn't exist for the Greeks, does that mean they saw all humans as equal? Uh, no.

Nell Irvin Painter: For culture, the ancient Greeks naturally thought that their culture was the best and that they were the civilized people and other people were barbarians.

John Biewen: The Ethiopians to the South, who happened to be darker? Good looking or not, they were barbarians. But so were the pasty people to the east.

Nell Irvin Painter: The Persians, for instance, were light-skinned and they were too light-skinned for upper-class Greeks who played their games in the nude and got suntanned. And they would laugh at Persians for spending too much time indoors, and the indication of that was that the Persians were really light-skinned. They didn't go outside and get suntanned. They were unhealthy.

John Biewen: The Greeks saw lesser humans in every direction. To the northwest, the Celts. That word, Celt, comes from the Greek name for the Celts, Keltoi, meaning roughly “the strange barbarian people to the west.” And to the northeast, the Scythians, a loosely-defined term that seems to have applied to people we would now call Slavic, but also Asian. The Greeks decided all those non-Greeks were inferior not because of the color of their skin or anything hereditary, but because of where and how they lived.

Oh, and, yes, in the ancient world, there was a whole lot of slaving going on.

Nell Irvin Painter: Slavery is so much bigger, slave trades are so much bigger than our idea of race.

John Biewen: The Greeks, the Romans, the Chinese, the West African kingdoms. They all practiced forms of slavery. The Vikings. All that pillaging they were known for? One of the main things the Vikings pillaged was people. And people of every color got enslaved. Folks in eastern Europe were hauled off into bondage so often and for so many centuries that the very word, ‘slave,’ derived from their name.

Nell Irvin Painter: Yeah. Slav!

John Biewen: But if all that slavery in the ancient world was not about race because race hadn’t been invented yet, well, who did invent it, and when? Going into this, I did not expect an answer to that question in the form of one person’s name and the year of the invention. But here’s a scholar who says, “yeah, I’ll tell you who did it.”

Ibram Kendi: So, yeah, my name is Ibram Kendi and I’m an assistant professor of history at the University of Florida.

John Biewen: Ibram Kendi’s book, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 2016. Before

we get to the guy Kendi blames for inventing race, and racism, a little more context that he offers about the ancient world. Yes, he says, people have always had the tendency to see themselves as the very best sort of people. Aristotle built a human hierarchy based on “climate theory,” which claimed that:

Ibram Kendi: The sort of temperate region of the Mediterranean has produced the most superior peoples, while the extreme cold or extreme hot northern or southern climates sort of lead to these inferior peoples.

John Biewen: But Kendi points out that not everybody thought that way, even back then.

Ibram Kendi: Just as you have these notions of human hierarchy in the pre-modern world, in the ancient world, so too did you have individuals like Aristotle’s chief foe in Athens...

John Biewen: He’s talking about a philosopher named Alcidas.

Ibram Kendi: ...who challenged those notions.

John Biewen: Aristotle said nature intended for some people to be enslaved by others. Alcidas wrote that: “God has left all men free; nature has made no man a slave.” And, likewise, Kendi says:

Ibram Kendi: Just like you had some Christians using Christianity to justify certain peoples as inferior, so too did you have Saint Augustine and other early Christian fathers who challenged those notions and expressed human equality.

John Biewen: Throughout history, there have always been thinkers who understood that humans are one. And there have always been people with the capacity to admire

cultures and societies different from their own. Kendi points to a man named Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan born in 1304.

Ibram Kendi: Yeah, Ibn Battuta, who basically is considered to be the 14th century's greatest world traveler, and so he traveled all the way over to Asia, up in through Eastern Europe, into the Middle East. He also traveled into sub-Saharan Africa. And he of course wrote about his travels and described sub-Saharan Africa, specifically the Mali empire. Which was—so you had these three major empires in pre-colonial West Africa: Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Some argue Mali was the most illustrious and the richest.

And so he visited Mali and spoke quite glowingly about Mali and how, for instance, that, you know, he traveled many places, but in Mali he felt safer than anywhere else. He also spoke about sort of the civilization of the people and other things of that sort. And when he went back to Morocco and wrote that, some of the armchair intellectuals thought he must be lying.

John Biewen: Battuta's claims about the glories of Mali were shouted down as lies for a very practical reason. His Islamic, Moroccan society was busy enslaving people from sub-Saharan Africa, as well as Slavs from eastern Europe.

Ibram Kendi: And so to classify these people as not inferior would have been of course difficult for slave traders, just as if people didn't classify the Slavs as inferior it would have been bad for business as well.

John Biewen: About a century after Ibn Battuta wrote admiringly about West African kingdoms, a Portuguese man wrote a book. And here we get to Ibram Kendi's culprit. His name was Gomes de Zurara. As Kendi recounts, the king of Portugal had hired Zurara to write a biography of the king's uncle, Infante Henrique, better known as Prince Henry the Navigator.

Ibram Kendi: Who of course was the first major slave trader to exclusively enslave and trade in African people from of course Portugal, in the mid-1400s.

John Biewen: Writing in 1453, Zurara chronicles and glorifies Prince Henry's historic voyage a decade before. It was the first time Europeans sailed to sub-Saharan Africa to seize captives directly, rather than buying sub-Saharan slaves from north African middlemen. In describing the resulting slave auction back in Portugal, in 1444, Zurara lumped together the very different-looking captives – some lighter-skinned Tuareg people, others much darker. He claimed that Prince Henry's main motive was to bring them to Christianity. So Zurara portrayed slavery as an improvement over freedom in Africa, where, he wrote, "They lived like beasts." They "had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in bestial sloth."

Ibram Kendi: And so I basically make the case that he was the first articulator of racist ideas. And in order for him to articulate racist ideas, he had to basically combine all of the different ethnic groups that Prince Henry was enslaving into one people, and then describing that people as inferior.

And so presumably, then, though he did not necessarily speak as much about whiteness, he certainly created Blackness. And Blackness of course cannot really operate without whiteness.

John Biewen: And to Kendi, this is crucial: Zurara was not just some independent chronicler, calling them as he saw them. As I said before, he was hired by the Portuguese king, Prince Henry's nephew, to write the book.

Ibram Kendi: Zurara was also a member of the Military Order of Christ, which was like this para sort of military, Christian organization similar to the Knights of Templar. And who was the leader of the military order of Christ? Prince Henry. And when Prince Henry said something and you were a member, you did it, including making him look good for slave trading.

John Biewen, to Kendi: So, it's fair to say literally that slave traders commissioned the invention of this sort of codified racist idea, of Black people and implicitly, then, on the other hand, of white people.

Ibram Kendi: Yes.

John Biewen: Zurara's writings were widely circulated among the elite in Portugal. In the coming years, the Portuguese, and their ideas about Africans, led the way as the African slave trade expanded among countries like Spain, Holland, France, and England.

Ibram Kendi: And then by the 1500s, you had other ideologues expressing similar ideas about African people. So the concept of the beast becomes sort of the way in which, for instance, the first British slave traders described African people.

John Biewen: When the British colonists came to the United States, what would become the United States, they were steeped in these ideas, is that fair to say?

Ibram Kendi: Yes. And so I make the case and show the pervasiveness of racist ideas in England in the early 1600s, to show the environment that these colonists were brought up in and the racist ideas that were circulating. And how, not only did they bring over bags, they brought over these racist ideas in their minds.

John Biewen: By the late 1600s and into the 1700s, with the scientific revolution and the age of Enlightenment, scientists got busy sorting the natural world into categories like never before. And they did the same with people. This is Nell Painter, again, author of *The History of White People*.

Nell Irvin Painter: During the Enlightenment, for Carolus Linnaeus, *Systemae Naturæ*, it's 1758. And then Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in Gottingen, Germany, first

publishing in the 1770s – by the 1780s and the 1790s using the word “Caucasian” for white people.

John Biewen: Linneaus named four human races, Blumenbach five. That was just the beginning of an unending argument about how to do the impossible, how to separate humanity neatly into distinct groups. Much later, an American anthropologist would say, no, it's three races. The three in my high school textbook.

John Biewen, to Painter: Hmm. And I think I remember, even as a, you know, 16-year-old, 17-year old, looking at that and thinking, and having questions. [Painter: Yeah.] Uh, what about all the people who don't fit neatly into these three groups?

Nell Irvin Painter: Yes, yes. And this has always been a problem for racial science.

John Biewen: Racial science that we'll be hearing more about in a future episode. But first:

Hey Chenjerai, it's me again.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey. What's going on, John? How you doing, man?

John Biewen: As we established in the intro episode for the *Seeing White* series ... I'm going to be talking with this friend of mine sometimes, to help unpack some of the ideas that come up in the episodes.

John Biewen: Chenjerai Kumanyika, communications professor at Clemson. A scholar, journalist, organizer, artist, and a gentleman.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: 'Me no be no gentle man at all.' [Laughter] Like Fela, you know what I mean?

John Biewen: I have to tell you, Chenjerai, I learned so much from these, particularly these two scholars, professors Painter and Kendi, and their books. It's some deep scholarship.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Dude, it's mind blowing. I mean, this is what happens when you actually call people who like know what they're talking about, like they're an expert in their field, you know what I mean? Because that doesn't always happen. I mean, this is what happens, right? Like people think just, you know, a person is Black. You know, I've seen things on race, like they pull Kanye, they might pull Shaquille O'Neal, like hey why are you interviewing these people to talk about race? It's not their thing. So, whatever I know, I definitely can't do what Kendi and Painter do, so I'm glad you talked to them.

John Biewen: Well, I couldn't get Charles Barkley's phone number, so....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh. We missed out on that.

John Biewen: Anyway. So, most of us have heard the news about the genome project but I don't think it's really sunk in in the culture at all, has it, that we are, for example, that you and I are – I think geneticists think that every human on the planet is no more than 50th cousins with every other human on the planet. We haven't gotten much in the habit of thinking that way, have we?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That like we're cousins, you and I? [Laughter]

John Biewen: Yes, exactly. You know, and in the piece we heard Suzanne Plihcik from the racial equity Institute say that race is not scientifically real and yet it's very real politically and socially. It's kind of a tricky thing to make sense of isn't it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. Yeah. I mean, I got to say when I really am putting on, like when I'm being sympathetic, I can kind of understand why it's confusing to people because for people who haven't thought about this, on one level that's what you're

trying to get them to understand, right? Like, the science, you know the genes, the genetic diversity, and you're like listen, scientifically race is not real, it's not a thing. But then let's just say I'm talking to a white person who's from the All Lives Matter crowd. You know, I'm talking to like a white person? And he's just like, exactly, so why don't we just stop talking about race and then it's like, no, no! it's actually real. It gets confusing.

John Biewen: Right, the person who says, 'so let's see, we can stop being concerned about it, we can stop talking about it, we can stop even keeping track of data on the different experiences of Black people. You all need to just stop making a fuss about race if you're going to insist that it isn't real.' And yeah that doesn't work too well, does it?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. I mean I think that's totally wrong you know but it is confusing, it's like race isn't real biologically but it is very real as a way that society has been structured. The effects of race as a social construct are real. The reason we can't stop talking about it is because we can predict wealth distribution, police killing, all kinds of other sort of life expectancy factors, health issues, based on race, access to schools, because society has been organized around a concept that is not biologically real. And then there's another thing about race to me that's also confusing, which is that we want people to understand race as like this systemic thing, this structural thing, that is in institutions and in patterns of the way rights and resources are distributed, and it's like a structural thing. It's not about just attitudes, like your distant cousin who's a bigot. Right? But we also do use the term racist for that too. So, I think that's confusing too because those seem like different things to me.

John Biewen: Right. And that connects. And we talked about that last time and it connects in a really significant way with the point that I think Professor Kendi is trying to make in his, with his history of racist ideas in the U.S., which is that he argues that we basically have the cause and effect relationship backwards, right? That we're sort of in the habit of thinking that the problem with race and racism starts with attitudes, that people look at other people and they look different or come from a different place, and

so there's this tendency to look down on that person or to have prejudice toward them and therefore to think well I guess it's okay to exploit or mistreat this person. And that's the history of racism, that's how this all has happened. And his argument is that it goes exactly in the other direction.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, if you think about it, I don't know about you but that's kind of like the history I sort of grew up on. Right. It was almost like, you know, white people didn't really know, they didn't understand that other people were human and that's why they mistreated people. But you can't really blame them because once they learned then, you know, they started treating people better so you sort of can't be mad. It was ignorance and it's a weird thing, like the ignorance is what caused the exploitation. And I think that's totally wrong. I think because, if you think about it, you know what Columbus on his first and second voyage over to the so-called New World. You know the mission was exploitation before they even met up with the Arawaks at the time, you know, Indians, like the whole issue was we're going to set up colonies and try to take land and try to get resources, right. And it wasn't like they just decided to do that once they encountered these people and didn't understand them. And actually, right on that same ship with Columbus you did have Las Casas who I still think Las Casas has some real race issues but certainly it would be hard to argue either he didn't have any understanding. I mean he studied the Arawaks and Taino Indians.

John Biewen: And slavery too. I mean people went to Africa to steal them some people. They didn't go, you know, as tourists and then look around and say oh look there's these people who we think are inferior and therefore I guess we'll....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, and what are we gonna do with them? You know they didn't say like "oh man here's these people, they're like subhuman and like three-fifths of a human being so what can we do let's create slavery." No. I mean that's kind of like what I grew up on and what people think, they just didn't know. And it's like, no. What they knew was that there was an economy there, like rice and cotton and other things, sugar, that had to be produced to make this economy go. And they wanted cheap labor

and they enslaved people and then they later sort of deployed the science and all these other cultural forms to match and support the idea that they could exploit these people because they were inferior. So, it really to me, even though you know once you really look at that the idea that exploitation comes first is just, you know, it's just a more rational explanation.

John Biewen: Right. And even some of this history that we heard about, you know, all kinds of people enslaved all kinds of people, including and in many cases people enslaved people who look like them.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right.

John Biewen: So you know it was only more in the last few hundred years that, at the same time that you had the Enlightenment and people to some degree having higher standards for how human beings treated each other, that then it seems that it became more necessary to have a justification to dehumanize folks before you—to justify enslaving them.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right.

John Biewen: But it's, yeah, it's the slavery that came first, not the other way around.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I think it's easier for people to think about it like it was just all just a matter of attitudes and not understanding, and like maybe people just didn't sit down and eat enough dinners together or something like that, because when you think of it that way you can make it about individuals who didn't understand. Where, when you understand the way that exploitation was sort of baked into the project of Western imperialism and the development of the United States. Then you have to go and question much more fundamental structures and much more fundamental ideas about our culture and all these other things, so I think it is harder to have to look at that.

[Music]

John Biewen: Chenjerai Kumanyika. Thanks to Nell Irvin Painter and Ibram Kendi and the folks from the Racial Equity Institute. We'll be hearing more from all of them in the next episode. In which we come to these shores. A look at how race thinking ... and whiteness ... blossomed – well, that's one way of putting it – in Colonial America and the U.S.A.

Suzanne Plihcik: Is this a little bit crazy? It gets crazier, and we need to understand that. Because folks, on crazy we built a nation. We did.

John Biewen: If you like the idea of more people hearing this series, and the show in general, please think about giving us a rating and review on iTunes or your podcast app of choice. If we get enough of those, the apps show *Scene on Radio* to more people and they find out we exist. Music on this episode by Blue Dot Sessions, Lina Palera, Kevin MacLeod, and Lucas Biewen.

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