

Scene on Radio

Chenjerai's Challenge (*Seeing White*, Part 7) Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-37-chenjerai-challenge-seeing-white-part-7/>

John Biewen: Hey, welcome back to *Scene on Radio*. I'm John Biewen. This is kind of a bonus, mini episode, dealing with some unfinished business here in our ongoing series, *Seeing White*. If you've been listening you may remember, a few episodes back, part three of the series to be exact, Chenjerai Kumanyika and I were talking. Chenjerai is my friend and collaborator on the project; he's a media scholar, activist and artist. At the end of that episode about slavery and race in Colonial America, I was kind of marveling, not for the first time, at the realization that race, and whiteness, were not created by nature and simply observed by people. They were man-made, built, for reasons that had entirely to do with power and greed.

John Biewen, to Chenjerai, from part three: This history on this continent shows something so different, which is that it was constructed with very specific purposes in mind, lines drawn around the definition...

John Biewen: Chenjerai responded by saying something I wasn't prepared for.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I gotta say, it's kinda good news and bad news on that note. The good news is, really, when you think about this thing called whiteness, there's not anything genetic that you share with folks that's different from what we all share with each other. So there's a message in here about our connectedness. But the bad news is that, in a way, the effort to get people to come together under the banner of whiteness has sort of always been about power and exploitation. So, I don't know what that means about trying to salvage the idea of, like, good whiteness. You know? That's something that you gotta wrestle with.

John Biewen: Hmm. Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Like, when was whiteness good? It's kind of like, when was America great? [Laughs.]

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It seems like the whole project was related to exploitation. So, if you identify that way ... yeah. I don't envy you, in terms of having to try to think about what that means. You know?

[Music]

John Biewen: I didn't know what to say just then, and it seemed like kind of a different conversation from the one we were having at the moment, so I left it there but promised to return to it. So here we are. The next time Chenjerai and I talked, we came back to his challenge.

John Biewen: Um, and I wonder, I've thought about what you said and I ... but I guess I have a question.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Okay.

John Biewen: Which is, I think there are several ways in which you could have meant that, right? Like, one is a question about me, like about my personal feelings as a white person. Is, does this kind of looking at the history in this way that we've been doing, does it present me with a kind of, you know, identity crisis of sorts. Like, "Oh my God, you know, how can I be both a white person and, and good?" [Laughs.] Considering....

That's one way of looking at it. Another way of looking at is that it's more a question about, what do we do? Right? Like, what do I do individually as a white person, or what do we do as a society, as a white-dominated society, to try to, you know, to try to

respond. And so, I'm not sure, I guess, what—I'm wondering exactly kind of what you had in mind.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. Well, just to go back to the first part. I mean, let me ask you this question. Let me ask, throw a question back at you.

John Biewen: Okay.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, do you, how attached are you to the idea of being white?

John Biewen: Yeah. I could say, actually, that when you said that, when you said, "John, I don't envy you having to wrestle with that," it threw me, it took me by surprise a little bit because I'm, at a basic like emotional, visceral level, this whole project is not causing—you know, I'm not losing sleep, over....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Detaching from whiteness.

John Biewen: ...some panicked sense about, oh, "How am I going to defend whiteness in light of all this?" That's just not, I can report that that's not there. Now, one, probably one—

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But let me just say this. I'm glad that you sort of don't want to defend whiteness. And I'm even glad that you, what it sounds like is you're willing to detach from your own whiteness. Because the willingness to understand what whiteness is, and be willing to, in a way, detach your identity from it, is I think part of what is required.

But I just got to say, I don't think we can get off that easy.

John Biewen: Uh-hmm.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Because, let me give an example. Like, when you graduated from college, right? Did you feel like that was a victory for white people?

John Biewen: [Laughs] No. I did not. That thought never crossed my mind.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. Right. But like, when I graduated from college, I felt like it was a victory for Black people.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And when I got my Ph.D., I felt that and was **told** that. Right? And you know, I mean, I don't know how you felt when, you know, Dylann Roof did whatever he did. But I can tell you that every time I see a criminal that is African-American, I've tried to train myself out of this, but there's a part of me that feels like I'm somehow a part of that, of that failure or something.

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's a thing I'm trying to like socialize out of myself because I think that's a horrible belief and, you know, I don't agree with it.

John Biewen: Right, and what you're getting at is this double standard, where, and this is part of, a big piece of whiteness, right? And of how whiteness works in a white dominated society, is that, one of our privileges, one of our benefits as members of the white club, is that we get to see ourselves, and be seen as, individuals.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yep.

John Biewen: And you're right, I don't ... when Dylann Roof massacred nine people in Charleston, I was horrified. But did I feel responsible, as in, did I feel like that he reflected badly on me? Um ... not much. I mean, there is, there is a little bit of a sense there of, "Oh my god. What are we doing here? What are **we** doing here?" I guess there's a little bit. But it's not the same. I mostly think, that, yeah, he comes from a very different place, and that's, that's not me.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And maybe Dylann Roof is like, Dylann Roof is the wrong example, because what we're talking about with this project is like these historical things, right, and this long historical legacy. And so, maybe the issue is, when you can release yourself as an individual from any connection or responsibility for **that**. That's what we're talking about, you know.

John Biewen: Well, I will say that, that this exploration, this whole project and other, you know, previous kind of insights and realizations that I've had that that would have led me to do this project, you know, those things do present a challenge to me. And it's not, it's not the challenge to defend or redeem whiteness as a thing. But it, but I guess it is you know, it's a sort of, well, what am I, John, what are you going to do? And I suppose at one level, even this project is part of the answer to that, because this is what I do for a living and it's what I know how to do, is to make audio stories. And so, you know, I can choose to do a project on whiteness instead of a project on something else.

And there's a kind of a stronger realization than ever that—I saw this quote by Angela Davis the other day and it resonated for me, that it's not enough to be, to be not a racist. And I think that for much of my life I probably felt that it was, that well "I'm not a racist, I'm just going about my life here." And yeah, I guess I sort of do feel, in light of this whole thing, you know, and what we're doing here, to feel somewhat more of a sense of well, what does it mean, what does it mean to be a more active anti-racist.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And I think this is where it's about elevating our thinking on this beyond the level of the individual, and thinking about it at a societal level, at a

structural level, you know? I mean, another way to think about it is, you can't face the history we're talking about, and see the continuity in, like, Jefferson's priorities and the problems with race and ethnicity that we face now, and then say "We're just going to leave all these structures intact but I'm just going to be like an individual anti-racist and sort of like just invite Black people to dinner." Right? It's like "I'm just going to make sure my kids can play with Black kids," which is how a lot of people think about anti-racist work.

John Biewen: Yeah,

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's like, no, we have to actually rethink structures and, you know—you look at the stuff about redlining, and housing. I mean, you look at, like, there's so much stuff you learn. I mean, it's like, we're going to have to redistribute some stuff. I know we don't like that word. But, let me just say it's like, like my friend Sabela has a concept called micro-reparations. You know, I'll give you an example. Like sometimes I'm on the treadmill and at the gym I go to there's like a limit on how long you can be on the treadmill. And I'm not proud of this, John. But there's been times I've seen like a white person, you know, waiting. And I still got like five more minutes on the treadmill, and I'm like, you know what? Micro-reparations. five more minutes on the treadmill. I'm taking it. You know what I mean? I'm taking it right now.

John Biewen: [Laughing.] I love it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm not proud of it.

John Biewen: Love it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [Laughing.] You know what I'm saying? But like, here's the thing. Like, it's just like, you know, that's not enough, ultimately. Like that just....

John Biewen: [Laughing.] It's not really the solution, is it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You know I mean, that's not getting it at all. It's like we're going to have to actually redistribute some things, at least some rights, resources, and representation, at a larger level. So I think it's not just the, I think you're right, it's not, individual anti-racism isn't getting it.

John Biewen: Right. And actually, later in the series at some point, we're going to get to some of those questions about, at the societal level, what the smartest people are saying about what we could do, not to make amends. I don't think that's possible. But to, you know, to address our moral and financial debt in some, in some tangible way. We'll get there. I don't think we'll probably inspire the whole country to do that, here in 2017, but we're going to, we're going to look at it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: All right.

[Music]

John Biewen: There's a lot more that could be said about all that, what becomes of a European American's identity in the face of the real history of whiteness in this country. None of us chose the color of our skin, or this racial caste system we were born into. But we do have choices now that we're here. I agree with Chenjerai: those of us deemed white can't just shed that identity in some easy way. We don't get to be generic individuals, standing outside the race drama—we're in it. We need to own our whiteness, including the ways it benefits us every day. The little ways, the life-and-death ways, the ways in which the very structures of society were set up to our advantage. And we need a conversation we're not having now, about how deep we need to go to remake this thing. Seems to me there's a way to acknowledge we're wrapped up in the whiteness project that our forebears created without believing it's really real or having allegiance to it.

Next time, a bigger, fuller, reported episode: whiteness and science. How people used so-called science to back up notions of white superiority, and still do.

Thanks for listening. Tell three friends about *Seeing White*. The response to the series has been strong, and it means a lot to hear from you about it, on social media, in those iTunes reviews. Follow us on [Twitter, @SceneonRadio](#), like our [Facebook page](#). The website is [SceneOnRadio.org](#). The show comes from the [Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University](#).