

Scene on Radio

Season 6, Episode 2: Crying “Negro Rule”

Transcript

Michael A Betts, II: Hey, John.

John Biewen: Hey, Michael.

Michael A. Betts, II: You’re gonna laugh, but I can’t shake the idea that the Wilmington of the 19th century was sort of like Wakanda.

John Biewen: OK, you’re right, I’m – well I’m smiling. But tell me more.

Michael A. Betts, II: Our last episode made me think of that scene from Black Panther, when Andy Serkis's character, Klaue, is being interrogated by the CIA guy, and he’s like, What do you actually know (about Wakanda?)

Sound: Black Panther scene, Andy Serkis as Klaue: What do you actually know about Wakanda?

Martin Freeman as Everett K. Ross: Um, shepherds, textiles, cool outfits.

Andy Serkis: It’s all a front. Explorers searched for it for centuries. El Dorado, the Golden City. They thought they could find it in South America, but it was

in Africa the whole time. / I'm the only outsider who's seen it and got out of there alive.

John Biewen: All right, I see what you're getting at. The difference of course is that those characters are talking about a place, Wakanda, that, in the story, exists in the present. But it's deliberately hidden – by Wakandans themselves.

Michael A. Betts, II: Yes, and in the case of Wilmington, North Carolina – obviously it's not fictional or fantastical like Wakanda. We're talking about a very real, non-comic-book world that existed more than 125 years ago...

John Biewen: The Wilmington we explored in Episode One....

Michael A. Betts, II: And *it's* hidden, to most of us, by a century or two of incomplete, and frankly racist, history.

John Biewen: Right. But importantly, in both cases, the picture of the place seems kind of hard to believe. In Black Panther, the CIA guy is incredulous because of the stereotyped image he carries about Africa. Wakanda couldn't possibly be this rich, technologically advanced place that the guy's describing.

Michael A. Betts, II: And in the case of 19th century Wilmington, we're all the CIA guy – even you and I, as we talked about last time. We learn about the amazing Abraham Galloway, and Wilmington as a 19th century southern town with Black people moving relatively freely and achieving great things – even before and during the Civil War. And we wanna say, *really?* Because our shared history as a country

doesn't tell us about places where Black people lived interesting, three-dimensional lives in that time period.

John Biewen: The fact is, we have a story to tell here, about a massacre and coup d'état, because Black people in Wilmington, North Carolina were doing far too well in the 1890s as far as the state's most powerful White people were concerned.

Michael A. Betts, II: Exactly. And I'm glad you said powerful people. What happened in November 1898 is sometimes described as an unplanned explosion – with lower-class White men, in particular, getting carried away. But that's not how it went down.

Theme music

John Biewen: From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 6: Echoes of a Coup, Episode 2. I'm John Biewen.

Michael A. Betts, II: And I'm Michael Betts.

John Biewen: This time out, the runup: the conspiracy and the propaganda campaign that set the stage for the Wilmington massacre and coup.

(Sound: Woman 1: Hi, I'm LeRae. **Woman 2:** Nice to meet you, I'm Shannon Vaughan. So what are we doing here? ...

Michael A. Betts, II: We spent a day in Wilmington with LeRae Umfleet. At the moment, she's chatting with a couple of research librarians at the New Hanover County library. They're gushing over this rare visit by LeRae, because she's arguably *the* leading historian on Wilmington 1898.

LeRae Umfleet: When I began doing the research on 1898, I began immediately to realize that this is a contentious topic, and that there are competing narratives of what happened....

John Biewen: Umfleet is a manager and research historian with the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. When the state legislature, the General Assembly, created what it called the Wilmington Race Riot Commission in 2003, it assigned LeRae to produce an official state report. She completed it in 2005.

LeRae Umfleet: My book came out in 2009. The book is called *A Day of Blood, The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot*.

Michael A. Betts, II: The push to create a commission started after the hundred-year anniversary of the coup in 1998. Some Wilmington community leaders realized that not enough people knew about this event that changed the course of their city.

Wilmington's two Black state lawmakers, Senator Luther Jordan and State Assemblyman Thomas Wright, worked for several years to get the commission going.

LeRae Umfleet: The commission wanted us to create a more solid, cohesive narrative of the causes and the effects, particularly those effects for the black community in Wilmington. And it was my charge to look at the economic impact, the social impact, and the cultural impact of the violence. And I took it and ran with it.

John Biewen: Books, articles, and documentary films that have been made since its release have relied heavily on LeRae's work, and some have built on it. Her report includes a portrait of Wilmington before it all happened, in the 1890s.

Sound: River water lapping, boat in distance

LeRae Umfleet: Wilmington was the largest city in North Carolina at the time....

Michael A. Betts, II: Population: About twenty thousand.

LeRae Umfleet: ...a little bit larger in the Black community than the white. Wilmington was an example of what the turn of the 20th century could be for the South, with everyone prospering regardless of your status prior to freedom and the Civil War. Not to say it was a wonderful place to live for

everyone or that it was a utopia, but, of the southern states, Wilmington residents had a higher rate of home ownership among African Americans.

John Biewen Wages and education levels for Black people were higher in Wilmington than elsewhere in North Carolina, too. In 1897, Black people owned 20-percent of the city's businesses. Black people held jobs as lawyers, bankers, architects, school teachers and principals, firemen, policemen, and mail carriers. Three of the nine city aldermen were Black; so was the Collector of Customs at the Wilmington Port, a prestigious, federally-appointed position.

LeRae Umfleet: So, if you were an African American and you wanted to prosper and you had the ability, you might would consider coming to Wilmington to begin to make it in the new world that we were looking at, at the turn of the 20th century.

Michael A. Betts, II: As we described in Episode 1, North Carolina's political climate stood out from the rest of the South by the late 1890s. It was still a thriving, multiracial democracy. The Democrats – the conservative, openly White supremacist party at the time – had been out of power for a few years and were hungry to get back in. A Fusionist coalition was winning elections, drawing votes from most Black North Carolinians and a good number of Whites.

John Biewen: Two parties made up the Fusion coalition: the Republicans, most of them Black, and the Populist Party, made up mostly of rural and working-class White people who'd soured on the Democrats.

Michael A. Betts, II: Fusionists had dominated the state elections of 1894 and 1896. Going into 1898, they held the governor's office and controlled the state Assembly. They held both of the state's U.S. Senate seats, and seven of eight seats in the United States House of Representatives. One of those congressmen was Black: George H. White.

John Biewen: In Wilmington, members of the Fusion coalition held the mayor's office and a city council majority in 1898. Leading up to the elections that year, Wilmington was a prime target for Democrats determined to make the South great again. They promised to end what they called "Negro rule."

Voiceover (Mike Wiley): From the Wilmington Morning Star, October 30th, 1898.

(sound of newspaper crinkle)

Voiceover: The Proof Cited of the Progress of Negro Rule. The Counties and Cities Named Where They do Rule, and the Offices They Hold....

John Biewen: In reality, of course, there was never any "negro rule" – just Black people exercising their rights as citizens and sometimes getting elected to office.

But historian David Cecelski told us that the planning to extinguish Black political power, and to restore unchallenged White supremacy, began quietly, well before the fall of 1898.

David Cecelski: The leaders of the Democratic Party had met at the Chautauqua Hotel in early December 1897. They had gotten support from banking and railroad interests, primarily, to fund the campaign. They would go back to them repeatedly over the next two years. And they devised a policy, a program that would reach into every part of the state.

Michael A. Betts, II: A pivotal figure was the chairman of the Democratic Party, Furnifold Simmons. He realized that Democrats could not win elections on the issues – so instead they would turn to race. Under his leadership, the party’s Executive Committee put out a campaign handbook in 1898 that declared, “this is a white man’s country and white men must control and govern it.” Historian LeRae Umfleet.

LeRae Umfleet: Furnifold Simmons and the statewide Democratic party committee used the white supremacy concepts as their basis for all parts of the framework to win the election plans for 1898 and 1900. And there were county committees at each county level that would receive sort of a basic kit of how to run a campaign based on this white supremacy campaign platform.

John Biewen: Simmons would later serve in the U.S. Senate for thirty years – he was the longest-serving senator in North Carolina history. A noteworthy artifact from his Senate campaign of 1900: A campaign button with Simmons’s photo and the words: “The Chieftain of White Supremacy.” In 1898 Simmons worked closely with Josephus Daniels, the editor of a leading newspaper in the state, the Raleigh News and Observer. Daniels had joined with a wealthy industrialist to buy the paper in 1894 and run it as a mouthpiece for the Democrats.

Michael A. Betts, II: Starting months before the November elections in 1898, Democrats and their allies in the press kept up a drumbeat of outrage and fear-mongering about “negro rule.” Daniels, the newspaper editor, would later boast that one of his most effective moves was hiring a man named Norman E. Jennett – who produced a series of vividly drawn and flagrantly racist editorial cartoons. One showed a huge foot, labeled “negro,” stepping on a small, prostrate White man – with the caption:

Voicever (Mike Wiley): “A serious question – how long will this last?”

John Biewen: Another cartoon, published on the front page of the News and Observer six weeks before the election, was titled,

Voicever (Mike Wiley): “The vampire that hovers over North Carolina.”

John Biewen: It depicted a monstrous Black figure with bulging eyes, sharp teeth, and bat-like wings labeled “negro rule.” The Black vampire is stepping onto a “fusionist ballot box” as it reaches with clawed hands to scoop up terrified, fleeing White women and men.

Music

[BREAK]

Michael A. Betts, II: The campaign for a White supremacist victory in 1898 was a statewide effort, but Wilmington was a top priority for the Democrats... as the center of Black success and political participation. Some prominent local businessmen formed committees to push for the end of “negro rule” in their city. One group called itself the Secret Nine.

LeRae Umfleet: The Secret Nine were men who were deeply involved in all of those planning meetings that were already happening because of the catalyst of Furnifold Simmons and the white supremacy platform that was being spread across the state.

Michael A. Betts, II: We’re talking about pillars of the community.

LeRae Umfleet: Men like Hugh MacRae, who had his hands in lots of business opportunities. Walter Parsley was very much involved in the railroad system, and Jay Allen Taylor, he's another very wealthy, upper leadership kind of man, not only financially but their family had been in Wilmington for a very long time....

John Biewen: Those White city leaders in Wilmington coordinated their efforts with leaders of the statewide campaign. The Raleigh Newspaper, the *News and Observer*, covered Wilmington closely, and editor Josephus Daniels declared in the fall of 1898 that “the cause of Wilmington [had become] the cause of all.” Another leading Democratic politician and a future Governor, Charles Aycock, called Wilmington “the center of the white supremacy movement.”

Michael A. Betts, II: Although that “movement” was planned and led by elites, LeRae Umfleet says one of their central strategies was using race to appeal to poorer White people. Some lower-income White folks had been attracted to the Fusionist Movement and its efforts to lift working-class people of all races. The Democrats mounted an effort to assure even the poorest White men of one thing:

LeRae Umfleet: They were still better than the Black workers because they were White, in the White supremacy campaign rhetoric. / Making them feel included and important through rallies and speeches and things like that, the secret nine and the county committee leadership were able to manipulate these white voters in Wilmington and bring them into the fold of making sure

that the White Democratic Party candidates got every vote that they could get.

John Biewen: Another recurring theme of the White supremacist campaign? The racist claim that rapacious Black men posed a threat to White womanhood – and that White men were complicit if they supported the presence of Black men in public life.

Glenda Gilmore: The idea that men are not being manly by protecting their families or that giving even an inch is going to cause an eruption of Black men pursuing White women, it's the oldest trick in the book.

Michael A. Betts, II: Historian Glenda Gilmore, a Professor Emeritus at Yale, is a North Carolina native. She's written several books on White supremacy and the lives of Southern women.

John Biewen: Glenda appeared in our Season 3 series, *MEN*, in our episode on intersectionality – where she brought up the propaganda campaign in Wilmington in 1898 as a glaring example of this ploy. She pointed out, in case it needs to be said, that the tales about rampaging Black rapists were a lie.

Glenda Gilmore: It was constantly pointed out in the campaigns from late Reconstruction through the turn of the century that there wasn't a problem with Black men raping white women, that those occurrences, if they happened at all, were extremely rare. But it was fairly common for White men

to rape Black women in the south and to have common law families. So the hypocrisy of that equation has always been there.

Michael A. Betts, II: But those facts didn't stop the fear-mongering – at all.

Voiceover (Mike Wiley), Rebecca Felton: If it needs lynching to protect woman's dearest possession from the ravaging human beasts, then I say lynch, a thousand times a week if necessary.

Michael A. Betts, II: That's from a speech that a woman named Rebecca Latimer Felton gave in Georgia, in 1897. She was a writer and activist in the women's suffrage movement – and a pro-Confederate former slaveholder.

John Biewen: It was common then to reprint popular speeches in the newspaper – since you couldn't watch them on YouTube. A Wilmington newspaper, the Morning Star, printed the text of Felton's speech a year after she gave it and three months before the election, in August, 1898.

Cedric Harrison: Wilmington was the only populated town that actually had Black political power at that time, and so....

Michael A. Betts, II: Cedric Harrison, who runs those tours teaching folks about Wilmington's Black history – points out that Wilmington also boasted a Black-owned newspaper, the Daily Record. It was popular with both Black and White

readers. Its owner, 32 year old Alexander Manly, was not going to let the Rebecca Felton speech go unanswered.

Cedric Harrison: And he responded to this article by saying that the interracial couples that he has seen grown, over the south, were very passionate and willingly and consensual on both sides...

Voiceover (Mike Wiley), Alexander Manly: Our experience among poor white people in the country teaches us that the women of that race are not any more particular in the matter of clandestine meetings with colored men than are the white men with colored women. Meetings of this kind go on for some time until the woman's infatuation or the man's boldness bring attention to them and the man is lynched for rape. / Tell your men that it is no worse for a black man to be intimate with a white woman, than for a white man to be intimate with a colored woman.

John Biewen: It's unclear whether Manly himself or one of his editors wrote the article, but as owner and publisher, Manly took the heat. For all its truth-telling, the piece was an unintended gift to the White supremacists. The White press, in Wilmington and across the state, reprinted it in the leadup to the election. Some papers published it day after day, using it to rouse White men – to go to the polls, and to commit violence if necessary, to disenfranchise Black people and their White allies. Here's LeRae Umfleet again.

LeRae Umfleet: One of the major tools of the white supremacy campaign was speech makers. One of the leading speech makers was Alfred Moore Waddell, a native of Wilmington, a Confederate veteran, and a very fiery speaker that could inflame the hearts and minds of his audience.

Michael A. Betts, II: In one speech that Waddell gave many times, he said this:

Voicever (Mike Wiley), Alfred Moore Waddell: We ... shall never surrender ... to a ragged rabble of negroes ... if we have to choke the Cape Fear River with the carcasses of dead bodies.

LeRae Umfleet: And that became a rallying cry for the white elements of the town, but it became a point of fear and intimidation within the Black community.

Music

Michael A. Betts, II: This is from a speech Waddell gave the day before the election, on November 7th.

Voicever (Mike Wiley), Alfred Moore Waddell: Go to the polls tomorrow, and if you find the negro out voting, tell him to leave the polls and if he refuses, kill him. Shoot him down in his tracks. We shall win tomorrow if we have to do it with guns.

Music

John Biewen: Almost guaranteeing that things would turn violent, Democrats and the Secret Nine formed an alliance with a vigilante organization, the Red Shirts. They'd been active elsewhere in North and South Carolina. Much like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers of today, the Red Shirts became the enforcement arm of the conservative political movement in 1898.

LeRae Umfleet: Red Shirts and White supremacy campaign leadership watched to make sure that they voted the correct way, which was the way of the White supremacy Democratic Party. And to keep African Americans away from the polls and Republicans away from the polls, a lot of work was also done for intimidation.

Michael A. Betts, II: Umfleet says this work started months prior to the election: preventing people from registering to vote, challenging the list of approved voters, removing people from the voter rolls. Threats to people's safety and livelihood carried on to the polling places on election day.

LeRae Umfleet: it was an extremely brave thing to do to go to the polls and vote for a Republican candidate. It didn't matter if you were white or black. It was putting your name out there as someone who was willing to stand up to the white supremacy campaign.

Music

John Biewen: The fact is, the White supremacy campaign of 1898 was carried out, for the most part, in public. What was about to happen – or some of it, anyway – was not a well-kept secret. Historian David Cecelski.

David Cecelski: I remember reading the journals of a Chicago newspaper reporter that got on the train two weeks earlier to go see the election being stolen in Wilmington. Everyone knew it was happening. I mean, it was like on his calendar. He had time to get on a train in Chicago and make the trip all the way down. / He sends letters, saying, I'm going down to see this election being stolen in Wilmington. I'm going to see the coup.

Music

John Biewen: Michael, before we unpack this episode any further, there's an important thing we should clarify for folks listening. This whole business about the 1898 *statewide* election, and the Democratic party's push to make sure it wins that election at any cost? That is *not* the coup d'état that the title of this series refers to.

Michael A. Betts, II: Exactly! This is what we're gonna get to in Episode 3, but the actual, literal coup, the sudden overthrow of a government using the threat of violence, that happens *just* in Wilmington – at the level of the city leadership. Those elected officials who would be pushed out of their jobs at gunpoint were not even on the ballot in November 1898. But the context we've laid out here *is* essential to understanding the political moment in North Carolina, and what was about to happen.

John Biewen: So yeah, it's important to make that distinction. At the same time, it's interesting to point out that we don't use the word "coup" to describe what the Democrats were planning for that statewide election.

Michael A. Betts, II: Right. Because if we did, we'd have to say that there've been a whole bunch of coups in U.S. history – not just one. Elections rigged, and really stolen, through violence, intimidation, voter suppression, ballot stuffing....

John Biewen: We talked about this in our Reconstruction episode in Season 4, but yeah, just in that post-Civil War period alone, especially the late 1860s through the 1870s, there was rampant violence and use of terroristic threats to keep Black people and their allies from voting, in various states across the South. Not to mention political assassinations to take out candidates.

Michael A. Betts, II: And don't get me started on the hundreds and thousands of elections that were undemocratic and basically guaranteed to enshrine White supremacy, by the centuries of mass disenfranchisement of Black people – both before the passage of the 15th amendment, and after, up to 1965. Or, of course, the century-plus of U.S. history in which no women had voting rights.

John Biewen: What if we used the word "coup" to describe the elections, right up to the present, that are skewed by intense gerrymandering, racial or partisan?

Michael A. Betts, II: How about the disenfranchisement of people in prison, or with a criminal record – disproportionately Black and Brown people? If that practice tips an election, is it a coup?

John Biewen: Having said all this, I think it's OK that we reserve the c word for something more specific, the sudden overthrow of a government – but just saying. We need to recognize that in America's deeply flawed democracy, a whole lot of elections have been decided in a lot of ways *besides* a legit choice by citizens voting on a fair playing field.

Michael A. Betts, II: Taking us back to Wilmington and the story we've been telling: You made a really good point, I think, one day when we were driving back from a reporting trip to Wilmington.

John Biewen: Oh yeah? I thought I made several, but which one?

Michael A. Betts, II: The one about White supremacy, and how weird it's been to do this research and look back at these newspaper headlines and campaign literature and speech transcripts from the turn of the 20th century, where people just said it, loud and proud. We're all about White supremacy!

John Biewen: Yes. And we talked about how that changed. So, for a long time, say from the 1970s on, most people tried super hard to not be seen as racist. So now that phrase is usually deployed only as an accusation toward somebody else. "So-and-so is a White supremacist" – with so-and-so guaranteed to deny it while expressing outrage at the accusation.

Michael A. Betts, II: Even some Klan members claim they're not racist. "We don't hate anybody, we're just standing up for us overlooked, victimized White people."

John Biewen: Yes. At the same time, though, quite a few people in the last, oh, let's say, since 2015, 2016, around that time for some reason, some White folks started feeling free to go beyond the old dog whistles and embrace more blatant displays of White supremacy.

Michael A. Betts, II: You know what this conversation reminds me of?

Video sound: [Applause]

Aziz Ansari, Saturday Night Live, January 21, 2017: I'm talking about this tiny slice of people that have gotten way too fired up about the Trump thing for the wrong reasons. I'm talking about these people that, as soon as Trump won, they're like, "We don't have to pretend like we're not racist anymore! We don't have to pretend anymore! We can be racist again! Whoo!"

Michael A. Betts, II: The comedian Aziz Ansari, on SNL the night after Donald Trump's inauguration in 2017.

Aziz Ansari: Whoa, whoa! No, no! If you're one of these people, please go back to pretending. You've got to go back to pretending. I'm so sorry we never thanked you for your service. We never realized how much effort you were putting into the pretending but you gotta go back to pretending.

[APPLAUSE]

Michael A. Betts, II: I gotta say, I'm with Aziz. I do wish people would go back to keeping their racism to themselves.

John Biewen: Yeah. No points for honesty when it comes to expressing your racism. Anyway, there is something instructive about the fact that a lot of White Americans 125 years ago openly embraced White supremacy and even that phrase. Because a lot of people who insist there's no White supremacy in America *today* also often deny that it ever was a major force in our country.

Michael A. Betts, II: Think of people like Tucker Carlson, who claimed a few years ago that White supremacy is a "hoax" and "not a real problem in America." But only four or five generations ago, a lot of people who, let's be real, were the political and ideological forebears of Mr. Carlson....

John Biewen: Even though they were big-D Democrats! Don't let that confuse you.

Michael A. Betts, II: Right. They were the conservatives of their time, fighting against the interests of non-White people and against the progressive White folks who supported those interests. And they called themselves White supremacists, as we said, loud and proud.

John Biewen: Yep. There's a pretty direct line, that's not hard to see, between the people who worked so hard at the turn of the 20th century to disenfranchise Black people and protect systems of White dominance and control, and the people doing that same work today.

Music

Michael A. Betts, II: I guess it's progress that it's become unacceptable to declare yourself a White supremacist. But, you know what would be *real* progress? If we could make it less acceptable to behave like one.

John Biewen: Next time: November 1898. The massacre and the coup.

Music

John Biewen: Echoes of a Coup is an initiative of America's Hallowed Ground, a project of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. It is written and produced by Michael A. Betts the Second, and me. Our script editor for this series is Loretta Williams. Voice actor, Mr. Mike Wiley. Music in this episode by Kieran Haile, Blue Dot Sessions, Lee Rosevere, Okaya, Jameson Nathan Jones, and Lucas Biewen. Our website is Sceneonradio.org. The show is distributed by our friends at PRX. Scene on Radio comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.