

Scene on Radio
Danger (*Seeing White*, Part 11) Transcript
<http://podcast.cdsporch.org/episode-41-danger-seeing-white-part-11/>

John Biewen: Hey, this is John Biewen. It's *Scene on Radio*. This is part eleven of our ongoing series *Seeing White*, looking at whiteness: where it came from and what it's for.

[Music]

The thing about seeing white—and here I mean not our series but the actual seeing of white, of whiteness—the thing about seeing white is that it changes how you see so many things. History. Politics, good lord.

News footage: Donald Trump, campaign speech: I am the law and order candidate. [Crowd cheers.]

John Biewen: You don't watch movies the same way.

James Cameron's *Avatar*, Jake Sully: The Sky People have sent us a message...

John Biewen: Here's the white hero in *Avatar*, taking charge of the tribal people of Pandora. You know, to save them.

***Avatar*, Jake Sully:** You ride out as fast as the wind can carry you.... [Na'vi man translates.] You tell the other clans to come! [Na'vi translation.]

John Biewen: Or sports, if you watch sports. There's a racially loaded slice of American life.

TV footage, announcer 1: Lin – flips it up and puts it in! Jeremy Lin once again!

Announcer 2: He has been a surprise in the first half!

John Biewen: But really, is there a corner of American life that's not racially loaded? Ice cream, maybe.

[Music: Mr. Softee theme.]

John Biewen: Everybody just loves ice cream, plain and simple. Even if you're vegan and not actually eating it anymore. Doesn't matter if you're black, brown, red, yellow ... or ... plain vanilla like me. Oh, right. So much for ice cream.

No doubt, this is why a lot of folks, especially white folks, would rather not see white. Complicates things. Even in our own individual lives. Get to know a little more history, get a richer sense of what race is and how it works, and moments in your present and your past can take on new meanings. Take a story that you sometimes tell, this thing that happened. It's one of your better stories in a life not all that eventful, frankly. You've told it to friends over the years. You get to seeing white, and it changes on you.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen, on stage: For my last bit tonight, I'm gonna just stand here and tell a story. Which is not something I usually do. As I said, the show is usually pretty produced. So I feel a little naked....

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen: That's a recording of a live show here in Durham, North Carolina late last year. A few of us podcasters based here in the Triangle got together and did this show at Motorco

Music Hall. I was working on stories for *Seeing White* at the time, and I thought I might use this one in the project somehow, this personal story, so I told it on stage that night.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen, on stage: I don't want to say I was naïve. As I walked down that street in a rough part of West Philadelphia, in 1986, the height of the crack epidemic and gang violence in American cities, pushing a pretty good 12-speed bicycle that was worth a few hundred dollars. I was 25. I'd lived most of my life up to that point in small towns in Minnesota—not places where you worried about walking down any street at any time. Minnesota, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all of the aggression is passive. [Laughter.]

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen: Gonna step in here with an apology. As I'm recording this, today, it's a week after the verdict in the trial of Jeronimo Yanez, the cop in suburban Minneapolis who killed Philando Castile. My glib line there about passive aggression in Minnesota? It's a twist on a line Garrison Keillor used every week in the public radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. Somehow, I don't think Philando's mother, Valerie Castile, or his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, or his little daughter, who watched him get shot to death, would find it funny. I'm sorry.

All right, back to West Philadelphia, 1986.

[Sound: Button Click.]

John Biewen, on stage: I'm walking down that street pushing my bike because I've just quit graduate school, roughly two or three weeks into a Ph.D. program. Decided very suddenly and decisively that I don't want to be an academic philosopher after all. That's another whole story, that I'm not telling. So I'm leaving town, and I'm leaving on a plane, and so my largest personal

possession, my bicycle, needs to be shipped. And in order to ship it, I need a bicycle box. I look in the yellow pages and find a bike shop about a mile away. Call them up, the guy says, "Yeah we've got a bike box you can have, come on over."

I'm renting a room along with some other grad students in a big Victorian house, on the edge of things, you might say, of a gentrifying neighborhood. One block in one direction and beyond, yuppies and investors bought up all the beautiful Victorians and spruced them up, and were living in them or renting them to students. One block the other way and beyond, this had not happened. It was very poor, almost all black, the streets were not considered safe in that direction. In fact, in the five weeks I lived in that house it was broken into twice and the owner had just put bars on the windows as I was getting ready to leave town. The bike shop that I was going to was in that direction, the rough direction. So it's a nice September morning. I ride my bike over to the bike shop.

[Music]

John Biewen: The trip to the shop was uneventful, so my memories of it are sketchy. I do remember riding down the middle of the street because there were no cars in sight. I passed a young black guy, about my age. He was on a bike, too, I think. I remember being a little nervous, paying close attention to what's going on around me. Because, let's face it, I stick out in this neighborhood. I'm thinking, it'll be okay. Hope it'll be okay.

I get to the shop and pick up the box and now I'm headed back. But I have to walk now, because a bike box is big and unwieldy, this long, flat, wide thing, and I can't carry it while riding. So I've got the box pinned against my body with one arm and I'm pushing my bike with the other. Once I get off the commercial street where the bike shop is, it's residential and there's almost no one in the streets. It's a beautiful, sunny, peaceful autumn day. It's all good. I've got a pleasant stroll ahead of me.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen, on stage: When I first see the two kids, they are half a block behind me and on the other side of the street. Not sure why I even looked back and noticed them there. They're walking in my direction. They seem to be looking in my direction, maybe just curious about the strange white guy in the neighborhood. They're young, you know, barely—younger end of the teenage years. They are black teenage boys, but I'm not a racist so I'm not making any assumptions. I turn a corner and keep walking.

It happens pretty fast after that. When I look back again, the kids have crossed to my side of the street and they're noticeably closer. It really kind of looks like they're following me now. I could still be wrong. I take a few more steps and look back again and one of the kids, the shorter of the two, has separated himself from his buddy. He's practically speed-walking towards me, and there's something in his hand. He's maybe only about ten yards away now. I can see the blade from here. It's about six inches long.

Now, in thinking back on this incident over the years, I've had a few questions for my 25-year-old self. One comes up here. A few of you may be having this question, which is; at this moment, why not just drop the damn box, which is literally worthless, jump on your bicycle and disappear? The answer, I'm afraid, is not very interesting, it's basically that sometimes I'm not too bright. Much later I thought, oh, that's what I could have done. At that moment, I guess I was focused on my goal or maybe not thinking too sharply having seen that knife.

So I walk on, and now I'm thinking, shit, now what? And I see up ahead of me amongst the houses, a few doors ahead, there's a bigger, kind of institutional-looking building. It's got a sign out front, I can make it out, you know, Hillcrest or something, it's a nursing home. I think, okay. Maybe a place I can duck into if I can get there. Trouble is, the kid is coming up alongside me now, right there, on the other side of my bike, walking beside me. He's jiggling the knife in his hand and he says, "Give me the bike."

He is 14, maybe 13. And you know how some adolescents, puberty comes early, they have the bodies of men? Not this kid. He looks like I did at that age: he's a boy. A boy with a knife and some attitude. He's looking kind of determined and a little aggressive but also a little unsure. I imagine maybe he was sizing me up and thinking, you know, if this collegiate-looking white dude thinks he can waltz through this neighborhood with a nice bike, maybe it's because he's a martial arts badass or something. I was not and am not a badass. I had no thoughts of fighting my way out of this situation, no interest in going hand-to-hand combat with anybody with a knife in their hand, including a kid a foot shorter than me. I had no plan whatsoever.

And yet for some reason, when he says again, "Give me the bike," I find myself shaking my head and saying, "No, I'm not gonna give you the bike."

[Music]

So we're walking now, side by side, and we're almost to the nursing home; the front door is right there, fifteen feet away, maybe. The kid sees what I have in mind and he hustles ahead, turns, and plants himself in the doorway, and holds up his knife. I stop, as you might imagine, and there we are face to face. His knife is a foot or two from my chest.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen: This moment probably lasts a few seconds, no more, but it's frozen in my memory. Scary black kids in the "inner cities" are big in the news at that time. The murder rate rose through the Seventies and Ronald Reagan's in the White House sounding the alarm. But then there's this actual kid right in front of me.

Let's give him a name: Michael? Michael has a round face. Short hair. I look into his eyes, he stares back at me. And before I'm aware of making any kind of decision, I find I'm taking one

step to the side and then forward, alongside him, pushing my bike and still hauling my box and just kind of sliding past him, and his knife, into the entryway of the nursing home. He doesn't stab me. He doesn't follow. Once I'm inside and I call out—"Hey, can I get some help here? There's a kid with a knife"—Michael, who's still standing in the doorway, says, "What a pussy." After a minute, he and his friend slowly wander off.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen, on stage: Folks in the nursing home called the cops for me. An hour later a police van came, took me and my stuff back to the house. The officer was a middle-aged black man. He asked me what the hell I thought I was doing walking through that neighborhood with a bike, and he shook his head and he said, "It's a lost generation." I think he was talking about the kid, not me, but I'm not entirely sure about that.

Went home, put the bike in the box, taped it up, shipped it off to Minnesota, and thirty years later I still own that bike here in Durham. And from time to time I've told this story over the years, you know, at dinner parties and things like that. But it's never really had a point. It was just, you know, makes a decent story, kind of a weird, scary thing. Did I ever tell you about the time I got held up at knifepoint? blah blah blah.

But in thinking about it now, with— given the way I see things now and maybe having a little more information and having become a little more thoughtful about what it means to be black and to be white in America, a couple of things that seem worth saying.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen: Yeah. First, one more question for my young self. Why was I so blasé about going into that high-crime, so-called inner-city neighborhood in the first place, thinking I could walk safely out of it pushing a valuable object in plain sight? I'd say part of my confidence was just

reasonable. By now I've spent time in a number of quote-unquote "bad neighborhoods," mostly because of my work, and I would venture into just about any American neighborhood on a weekday morning. Walking through that one in West Philly probably would've gone fine nine times out of ten.

[Music]

But if I look straight and hard at what was in my head that day, I see other things now. I'd grown up in a world that always felt safe. For me. And even though the whole country was obsessing about all the gangs and drugs and violence in cities like Philadelphia in the 1980s, I still carried my habitual bulletproof feeling. I was used to a world that kept me safe and I just didn't believe that world would let me down, regardless of where I went.

And, again, thinking back on what was in my head that day, there's something more cringe-worthy. I think I expected to get credit for displaying my lack of fear, my non-racist, non-profiling swellness. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I imagined folks in the neighborhood looking at me admiringly, even gratefully. Damn, look at that, there goes one of the **good** white folks, coming through, not believing the hype about us and our neighborhood. Forget mugging that guy. Give him a round of applause.

So, yeah. I was naïve. Arrogant in a way. Presumptuous. I was pretty white.

[Music]

John Biewen: Here's the other thing to say from my perspective now.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen, on stage: In the story as I've told it over the years, I'm the one in danger. The kid is the threat, I'm his potential victim. And yes, in that moment, he had a weapon, he was threatening me, he could have hurt me.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen: But isn't it fair to say, of the two of us meeting on that street that day, in our everyday lives, Michael was by far the more vulnerable person? To say that, I don't need to know anything more about his life besides the fact that he was a black teenager living in that neighborhood. A place, like so many others, created with systematic inevitability by the history of exploitation and exclusion we've been talking about in this series. Here was a community of black people just a few generations removed from slavery, still struggling to find a way in, still pretty much walled off from the life of safety and opportunity that I took for granted.

[Music]

This is not about letting Michael personally off the hook. It's about finding his existence, and his attempt that day, understandable. I came down his street with my awkward burden, like a wounded wildebeest limping across the plain, and he did a dumb thing, a wrong thing, trying to get something he could sell. But if he'd done violence to me, the hammer would have come down on him. And he knew that. It didn't take any great bravery to make the instinctive decision I made, to hold onto my bike and push past him. It just took looking into Michael's brown eyes in that moment. If I'd seen real anger, real hatred, someone itching to stab somebody ... but I didn't. I didn't see a killer. I thought I saw in those eyes that he knew how things were, how little power he had compared to me.

Michael and I were both young Americans, but I'd walked into his America from an entirely different one. I didn't grow up really privileged, by white people standards. My dad was a high school teacher in that Minnesota town, my mom worked sporadically while raising five kids.

They genuinely struggled to pay the bills. But my folks had college degrees. We were middle-class, white Americans with books in the house. There was never any doubt my siblings and I would go to college. The road was nicely paved for me. And here I was, in my twenties, trying to figure out my new path now that I'd decided that the academy would not be sufficiently fulfilling to me personally.

Michael and I lived in a country designed from its beginnings, and ever since, to keep one of us safe, to help one of us thrive, to give one of us choices. I wonder how he is now. I hope he's doing well.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: John.

John Biewen: Chenjerai, how's it going.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's going well, man, you know. I live in Philadelphia now. And, thinking about what happened to you, there's a lot of things I could say that would be kind of typical for this kind of conversation. Like, I could apologize to you for what happened [Biewen laughs], since all black people are accountable for what that young man did. And because the violence against white people is of course the ultimate tragedy.

John Biewen: Yes.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But this is the *Seeing White* podcast, and you know we don't get down like that.

John Biewen: That's right.

John Biewen: Chenjerai Kumanyika, assistant professor in the Rutgers University Department of Media Studies. He's also a journalist, organizer, and artist. In most of the episodes of the *Seeing*

White series, he joins me to talk things through and keep me honest.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: All right. You've told this story in the past to friends, right? And I'm guessing they're white friends, mostly.

John Biewen: Yep, most or all. Yes.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm going to go ahead and assume that these were good white people.

John Biewen: Absolutely. Like, to a person. That's the only kind of white person I hang with.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: All right. Keep it that way. [Laughs.] But I'm genuinely curious, what kind of conversations do good white people have about this kind of thing when black people aren't around? Because I don't I don't have access to that. So how do, how do people react to you telling the story?

John Biewen: Yeah, I guess what I would say and from my memory is that the conversations are pretty superficial, kind of like the story itself as I typically told it. You know, there's this whole unspoken backdrop of a story like this, of the centuries-old image of the Dangerous Black Man threatening us more civilized white people. And so there in the story, there I go venturing into the dangerous neighborhood, the metaphorical jungle, and sure enough I have this encounter with this young African American guy and his weapon. But that's all kind of unspoken, and the people that I would have told this to in the past are not the sort of people who are going to then proceed to say racist stuff.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: As I did not. You know, making some comment about, "Well see, there you go, that's how those people are"—you know, it's not like that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: But it also typically, in my memory, didn't lead to any kind of deeper analysis or even acknowledgement. It's sort of a gee whiz response: "Oh, that's a hell of a thing to experience," or maybe it's kind of, "What were you thinking, why didn't you just give the kid the damn bike?" You know, sort of a, just at the kind of surface level of the actual story. And so, that's I guess in a way what I'm 'fessing up to here is that I told the story in that spirit, too, just as a, as an interesting yarn of something that happened, with all that racial and historical freight sort of hanging in the air but not really acknowledged and talked about directly. So I guess that's kind of my point here is to confess to that and to try to address some of the stuff that I've left out when I've told it at a dinner parties or whatever.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. And I mean I think it's good that you want to look more deeply at that backdrop, right? And look at the white supremacist political and economic history that created that neighborhood in Philly, and to imagine, you know, why this guy that we're going to call Michael might have made some of the choices he made. Because ultimately, my thing is, when we as a society create situations where a huge group of folks exist in a daily state of insecurity and unsafety, nobody really can expect to be safe. And I guess given that kind of condition of disparity and exploitation, should we really expect to be safe? Any of us.

But if I could put on my professor hat for one second. Given everything that we've talked about, what do you think is actually missing from the conversations that you might have been having when you told the story?

John Biewen: You know, in thinking about this, and very much in the spirit of the *Seeing White* project, and we've talked about, throughout this project, about sort of turning the lens around and looking at—you know, that usually when we look at race in America that means looking at people of color and what's going on with them, with you. And that in this project we're turning

and looking at white people. And in that spirit, in this case, I wanted to talk about the flip side. We can come back to the, you know, to the trope of the of the scary violent black male and I want us to do that, and the specter of black-on-white violence, and of course black-on-black violence which is a favorite topic of a lot of white folks. But I also want to talk about the body count on the other side, which we really don't talk about in this country.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Ah, you're talking about the weaponized whiteness. White on black violence.

John Biewen: White on black violence. You just don't hear that phrase a lot do you, in the news media...

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Nah.

John Biewen: Or in school, or in the history books. And you know, as I was thinking about it, a mental image kind of came to me without, sort of uninvited. And it's an awful image but maybe it's useful for this conversation. Picture a gigantic scale. Right? On one side, the bodies of white people killed by black people throughout history in this part of the world. On the other side of the scale, the bodies of black people killed by white people in the United States and Colonial America in the last 400 years. It's grotesquely out of balance, of course.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. You know, that's a good, I mean that's a horrible image but sometimes having an image like that is useful. And let me say again, I mean I'm in favor of creating conditions in which we all are equally safe, or at least where the risk is distributed more equally. But since you mentioned that, I mean, I would say yeah, we have to think about that, and I think one of the first things we have to do is we have to think a little bit more broadly about what we're going to call violence. Because some of the most potent forms of violence are institutionalized things that organize people's lives, and they kill in a slow and diffused way that actually touches maybe even more people. And so, I do think we have to call

those things violence. And we've talked about some of those things, but we could just think about slavery and all the different types of physical violence that happened within slavery.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You got, you know, I think by the time of the Civil War, there's four million human beings enslaved in this country. And you can't even quantify how many millions of black people had their lives stolen, during their lives, in the 200 plus years of chattel slavery. I mean it's a massive scale of violence.

John Biewen: Absolutely. And I don't know, I actually tried to find figures, estimates of, if you were to add up all the human beings who lived their lives enslaved in the United States and in colonial America, how many people is that, and I actually couldn't find an estimate like that. But there are some other numbers that shed some light on that, that I looked up.

Historians estimate that 10 to 15 million African people were captured by slave traders in the Atlantic slave trade between the early 1500s and the 1860s. Now, that's counting the Caribbean and South American slave trades, which actually account for the vast majority of those people who were actually captured in Africa. Only about 5 percent of that total came to North America. Most of the black people who lived as slaves here in the U.S. over the centuries were born here. So most of those four million, right, in 1860, were people who had been born here over many generations.

But, back to the to the captured African people, the estimate is that up to 40 or 50 percent of those people died before they ever really lived as slaves. So between the time they were captured and their captivity on the African shore; the middle passage, of course, which killed many, many people; and the process of being broken and tortured into slavery in the New World. In looking up this, in doing this research, I came across a word I had never heard before,

that slave owners called it “seasoning.” There's a euphemism for the ages, the process of breaking someone down and—acclimating them, was another term—to slavery...

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: ...after stealing them from their lives across the sea.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. And I mean, you know, the numbers get a little bit higher, a lot higher, when you start thinking about the difference between the enslaved people that were brought into the United States—there were, more people were brought into like the Latin American and Caribbean. And you know, but I mean if you're looking at the death toll that you talked about, you know, around 2 million or so. But it's, people who survived, they also have shorter lives. And I mean, it's just hard to quantify. So even for the four million blacks that were here by the mid-19th century, it's estimated like half of their babies died. You know, things like that. And then there's like the violence, because we're counting violence, right? We're like building this image that you have, on one side....

So then you have the violence of separating families from each other. I mean, I think people know that, but you know I really, I've really been thinking about that lately, what that means, to have your children constantly under threat and actually being physically taken away. Wives and husbands and mothers and, you know, that's a special kind of violence there. And then of course there's lynching. Right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So, during slavery and then after slavery, into reconstruction, you have that kind of racial terrorism. White people lynched over, close to five thousand African-Americans [from] the Civil War [to] the middle of the 20th century. And those are just the ones that you could document. The real number, I mean all these people who disappeared and were

murdered without, you know, any kind of real accountability in the 18th and 19th centuries and even in the 20th century, those aren't even counted in those numbers. These are the ones that we can sort of document. And a lot of us, I mean, I know that there's, people feel like they have heard some of these numbers before, but I think that a lot of us repeat these numbers and kind of rehearse this because there never has really been a real attempt to account for this and to acknowledge the scale of violence against black people.

John Biewen: Yeah. I really agree with that and that's why I think it's worth having this conversation. And I can imagine that there are people who would hear this conversation and say, Oh my god, there they go again, haven't we heard enough about this? And my, I think the answer to that question is absolutely not. Because even though, you know, to the extent that slavery gets mentioned and talked about and acknowledged, it's usually just that one word. You know it's this sort of big, abstract concept. And we don't have in our minds—we have in our minds, for example, that six million Jews died in the Holocaust. But we don't have in our minds that—I think most people don't, I wouldn't have known if I didn't look this up—how many people were enslaved when the Civil War started, or any of these kinds of estimates of how many people died or you know had their lives stolen from them in these ways. We don't get presented with it in a way that even begins, I think, to get across the scale of the crime against humanity.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, but I mean I think this is really important, you know, if we're going to look at the context of black people being understood as essentially violent. Like we're somehow essentially, violence is a part of us, and that the primary fear that we should be concerned about in society is the fear of black folks, some massive black violence on white people.

John Biewen: Yes.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's in that context especially that you have to think about this, why it's relevant to bring that back up and say, well, if we're going to essentialize, [laughs], like you said, let's do a different kind of accounting.

John Biewen: I mean the fact is that that there's nothing remotely comparable to these things, this mass killing and violence that has been done by white people against black people, there's nothing comparable on the other side of the ledger. And yet for centuries now, white folks have been telling ourselves and each other that that you all are the ones to be feared.

Now, here in 2017 it is the case that black folks commit a disproportionate share of violent crimes in the United States today. And I looked up a statistic or two on this topic, from the federal government. Black folk commit over half of robberies and murders and almost half of the assaults in the nation's biggest metropolitan areas, though African-Americans are only about 15 percent of the population in those places. Now, that doesn't mean that white people are justified in being scared when they walk past a black person somewhere, right? The vast majority of violent crimes committed both by black people and by white people are against people they know, people in their communities, people who look like them. Ninety percent of homicides committed by black people are against black people. And likewise, 83 percent of white homicide victims are killed by a white person.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. A woman named Efia Nwangaza taught me to call that interpersonal violence. You know?

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Because that takes this racialized stigma out of it. And that violence, it hurts. I mean I've seen what, the pain that victims and families have to go through, whether they're black or white or Latino or whatever your identity is. Violence is serious, and I don't want to, I understand if you've been a victim of this violence, it's like, you don't want to just

write it off like it doesn't matter. But you know the truth is that the crime, the higher crime rate among black folks is also a socioeconomic problem.

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And the Bureau of Justice Statistics says poor urban white people and poor urban black people have similar rates of violence. So again, you put people in certain conditions and it doesn't matter what their ethnicity is, they're going to, you're going to have certain phenomena of interpersonal violence. I mean, this is proven. Also you have riots, right? That's another thing, that there's a history of white riots of various kinds, that can also be linked to certain kinds of economic conditions. The problem is that there's disproportionately more [poor] black people than poor white people, I mean at least in terms of, relative to the larger population. Which is, and that is linked to this history of exploitation that we've been talking about here. So you know, exclusion from resources, government housing practices, all these things that have produced that. So again, you create that kind of condition where folks are insecure, and black folks are disproportionately in that situation. And then, what results from that is then looked at as the cause as opposed to the result.

[Music]

John Biewen: Chenjerai, have you watched the dash cam video of Philando Castile being shot that came out the other day?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [Takes deep breath.] I have not. I didn't watch it, man. You know, I've watched these videos, and you know I've marched, and I feel like eventually I'm going to have to watch it because I don't think that as someone who's alive and has the ability to work against this, I think eventually I do have to face it. But I just couldn't, when I saw that there was that video. I read descriptions of it, but I was like, I just can't. I just, I knew I couldn't, I couldn't see it. And actually, I wonder what is the effect of watching so many of these videos and their being

shared? I mean, I think it's important on one level, but there's something that starts to become unhealthy about that. So I haven't, I haven't seen that video yet.

John Biewen: I watched it. And, you know, it's clear that what we have is a society in which, if a police officer says—**says**—they were afraid, and I guess I don't have any, it appears that officer Yanez lost his cool completely, that he was terrified in that moment. Pulled out his gun and fired off seven shots. But that we have a society in which if an officer says they were afraid, then that's, that settles the issue. Whether they had any justification or not for that fear. If the person is black, at least, and you say you are afraid, then we believe you and it's all good, and that's what judges and juries say again and again.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. If a black person is, if someone else feels threatened by a person of color, a black person, then they are, you know, they're responsible for whatever happens to them, is the message. And not just the message. I mean it's basically the law at this point, because it's been reproduced, there's so much precedent for it, that it operates as a kind of law.

John Biewen: And you know, as a white guy having these conversations with you, and this one in particular, I—for what it's worth, which is probably nothing. But I'll say it anyway. I just feel very humbled about my ability to imagine, to imagine what it must be like to be on the other side of that divide. I can intellectually understand that you see these things happen and know that you could be next. That Philando Castile did nothing whatsoever to deserve being shot by a police officer, aside from being a black man, and that he had been pulled over you know 46 times before that, before this terrible thing happened. And I know intellectually that that would not happen to me, just as I know that my son, who recently made it to the ripe old age of 18, could go out of our house when he was 12 or 13 with his Airsoft gun, sort of like the gun that Tamir Rice had in that park in Cleveland....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. Tamir Rice.

John Biewen: And it would have never occurred to me in a million years to tell my son not to do that, not to not to go out with his toy gun because a police officer might drive up and shoot him dead. It wouldn't occur to me to tell him that because in fact it would not happen. No cop of any color would do that to my son. And I know that the way that I know the sun will rise in the east tomorrow morning.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Uh-hm.

John Biewen: So, you know, to say that I can imagine how it feels to be on the other side of that, it just wouldn't be honest. I can't.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: How it feels to be on the other side of that is, is horrible, I'm not going to lie. Yeah, every time I get pulled over by the police, I'm conscious that I don't even have to do anything dramatic. It could just, if the person feels, you know, a subtle shift in my tone, certain body language, could escalate to the point very quickly, like I could feel the beats that would lead to me being killed, you know. And so I'm aware of that. You could tell the police officers are aware of it, they're aware of the power of the precedent of the law and these decisions that are behind them. So that's, yeah, that's not a good feeling.

But I kind of, you know, a lot of times in these conversations, when we get into talking about how we feel about this, I feel like there's almost like this moment of catharsis that happens, where we try to feel—and I worry about that because I wonder if that feeling sometimes, we try to walk away from that because now we felt that we tried to connect. We felt Philando Castile's mother's pain, or Diamond Reynolds' pain. It's like you know, I'm less interested in, I mean I'm interested in—we've got to feel. You know, we're human.

But my thing is, what are we going to do? How do we allow this kind of system to remain in place? And, because we're talking about people who recoil from that violence but they also

recoil, I mean, a lot of us recoil from the idea of a radical rethinking of the system that's called a criminal justice system. You know, people are comfortable with tweaks in it, people are comfortable with police training, body cams, those kinds of things. Even as the research comes out and shows you, I mean like, how much footage do you need to realize that the video isn't what's doing it? I'm glad we have the footage. But how are we comfortable with this system? I mean, there's a resistance. You know, people feel a lot, but there's a resistance to actually concluding that this system that's called the criminal justice system has to be radically rethought at a fundamental level that goes far beyond body cams and things like that.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I don't know if it's because people have family that are police officers? But, I don't know if it's just, people don't want to, people sense that the lifting of really transforming the system—but the thing about it is, you know, I mean you didn't necessarily ask me how I feel. But I am curious about, or the question that I want, since we're talking about whiteness, the question I want white folks to carry with them is, it's like, what is that resistance really all about? Because it wouldn't take very many white people to actually transform the system. To end this, actually. I think it would take very few relative to how many white folks there are. And I think no one is waiting for white folks to do it. Organizers, I think black folks have gotten the message, if we wait for white folks to change these things, you know, it's like, don't hold your breath.

[Music]

John Biewen: Thanks, Chenjerai Kumanyika. Our editor is Loretta Williams.

Next time, an African American photographer and her photo essay: *My White Friends*.
Turning the lens, literally.

Music in this episode by Sumtimes Why, Lee Rosevere, and Blue Dot Sessions. If you're new to the show, and the series, by all means go back and listen to what you've missed. The earlier episodes in the series go pretty deeply into history and help explain how we got here. Like our page on [Facebook](#), follow us on [Twitter, @Sceneonradio](#). The website is [SceneonRadio.org](#). The show comes to you from the [Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University](#).