Scene on Radio
White Affirmative action (*Seeing White*, Part 13) Transcript
http://podcast.cdsporch.org/episode-44-white-affirmative-action-seeing-white-part-13/

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Kathryne Foster: Whiteness. The color of white. It means so much different to me today than it did once upon a time. I used to associate white with the color of clouds or the color of snow. But now, whether through my personal interactions or the media or just society in general, unfortunately the color white represents … power. Supremacy. Privilege.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen: That's Kathryne Foster, who lives in Charlotte, North Carolina. She was reflecting while driving in her car after the first day of the Racial Equity Institute's anti-racism workshop last winter. I loaned Kathryne a recorder and asked her to share some of her thoughts.

[Sound: Button click.]

Kathryne Foster: Um, I see myself as bad because I'm white. And that's not who I am. I'm a good person. And every day I fight the temptation of becoming jaded. I don't like this feeling. I wish I had an answer, but I don't.

[Sound: Button click.]

John Biewen: I also gave a recorder to Dan Pliszka.

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Dan Pliszka: I'm wondering if this class is approaching this subject from a negative point of view. We did go through some of the history of racism, of all that went in to creating this. But I tend to be an individual that tries to look at getting ahead from a positive standpoint. I do see people that don't have advantage, people that get stuck in systems and don't know how to navigate systems, and it's more about navigation than it is about racism. It's about having the drive, the will, and the energy to move forward. You can't just lay back and say, "Bestow it on me."

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[Music]

John Biewen: People have asked me, what made you decide to do the *Seeing White* series? The answer is, a whole bunch of experiences, and reading, and slaps upside the head over many years. And then, yes, the stuff from the past few years that I highlighted in part one: the police shootings of black people, the Dylann Roof massacre,

the unending drumbeat of racist incidents from so many corners of American life, and the widespread embrace of Trumpism and white identity politics among people who look like me.

But if there was a single day that sparked the idea to take on whiteness on this show, it was the day in December 2015 when I first heard the folks from the Racial Equity Institute do their affirmative action talk. It was part of that workshop which the first time I attended as a regular participant here in Durham, North Carolina. Only some of what they said that day was new to me. But putting things together the way they did, that ninety-minute talk hit me like—well, let's just say it was clarifying. That part of the workshop was the number-one reason I went back to an REI course a year later, in Charlotte, this time recording.

[Sound: Applause.]

Deena Hayes-Greene: Thank you, Bob. It's good to see you, sweetheart. Take care. So we're gonna get started….

John Biewen: Deena Hayes-Greene is Managing Director of REI. We've heard from her and her colleague Suzanne Plihcik several times in the series. Here's how Deena opens the talk in question on the morning of the workshop's second day.

Deena Hayes-Greene: How many of you in here are familiar with affirmative action? Good, so just about everybody has some idea about affirmative action. Can we agree that affirmative action was a, executive order, legislation that was giving people of color access to institutional opportunities, by race, and included gender? Was that just sort of the core component of affirmative action? Who knows when it was legislated, around the decade? You don't have to know the exact year, but what decade was that legislated? Seventies? Everybody good with Seventies? That would be the *nineteen* seventies, would be the century? [Laughter.] Okay, we'll go back and look at that in just a minute.

John Biewen: She will return to question that premise. But for the moment, Deena goes on without missing a beat.

Deena Hayes-Greene: How many of you are familiar with forty acres and a mule? Who's familiar with that? Okay, so shortly after the Civil War, General Sherman signed an executive order allocating some land, forty acres, to *some* formerly kidnapped and enslaved Africans in *some* places, and there's actually some documentation that there was some distribution of land, around 400,000 acres.

John Biewen: Deena doesn't say this, but the implication seems clear: forty acres and a mule could be called an early example of affirmative action, or even reparations, for the formerly enslaved African American people. If only the government had made good on General Sherman's plan.

Deena: What's less known is that was overturned a year later, and most of what was distributed was confiscated and returned to the original white owners.

[Music]

John Biewen: When it comes to government assistance for white folks, though, the follow-through has been better over the years. Much better. I'm John Biewen, it's *Scene on Radio*. Part thirteen of *Seeing White*, our series looking at the white so-called race. Where whiteness came from and how it works.

Affirmative action is up for debate again, after reports that the Trump Administration plans to scrutinize college admissions programs. Some surveys show that support for affirmative action among white Americans has declined over the last few decades. And at the same time, concern about what some call "reverse racism" has risen. A poll in 2016 found 57 percent of white Americans believe discrimination against whites is as big a problem as discrimination against black people. In a separate poll, 45 percent of Trump supporters said white people face "a lot of discrimination." Only half as many Trump voters said black or Latino people do. Can't wait to hear what Chenjerai has to say about that.

If you've been listening to this series, you know our premise is different: that racism in America is something white people do, because white people pretty much have all the

power and control the institutions. But even given that assumption, there are nuances, different ways of understanding what racism does. Early in her talk that day in Charlotte, for the forty or so people sitting in a big circle, Deena Hayes-Greene reminds us of the way it's typically understood.

Deena Hayes-Greene: We say that we have either learned or been educated to see racism as individual acts of meanness, that it's something that harms people of color and that we can see the oppression. We have programs and we have projects that are focused on identifying and examining that.

John Biewen: In other words, we're used to seeing racism as a system or an attitude problem that hurts people of color while leaving us white people alone. It leaves us free to do our thing, to make our mark, in what we generally like to see as a meritocracy. But as Deena is about to show, for many, many of us and our ancestors, being white meant more than just not being harmed by racism. It's often meant getting stuff. Deena gets out her markers and starts a list on a flip-chart. She says the handouts started early, long before the American Revolution.

Deena Hayes-Greene: Suzanne covered yesterday, 1613, that John Rolfe was our first tobacco magnate. And tobacco is land and labor intensive.

John Biewen: Deena first talks about an enticement, way back in 1618, to come to the colonies and get some land.

Deena Hayes-Greene: So the Headright system, created in England to address the labor shortage in Virginia, was giving people fifty acres of land, or two units which would be a hundred acres of land, for anyone that was willing to cross the Atlantic ocean or pay for someone to cross the Atlantic ocean and populate the colonies.

John Biewen: Got that? The Headright system, 1618. Free land, only Europeans need apply. Deena's moving on. No time to linger, there's lots of ground to cover here.

Deena Hayes-Greene: 1705, are you familiar with a statute in Virginia that required masters to give white indentured servants fifty acres of land, thirty shillings, ten bushels of corn and a musket, anybody heard of that?

John Biewen: It seems most people in the room, myself included, have not heard of that. Unlike the forty acres and a mule for black people freed from slavery 160 years later, this gift of land, cash and food for freed, *white* indentured servants, is not overturned.

You might remember, 1705 is the same year the House of Burgesses passed the Virginia Slave Codes. Those laws locked in a brutal system of white supremacy by giving slave owners sweeping rights to control and even torture the African people they owned, and making it illegal for black people to employ white people. These two legislative moves, the Slave Codes and the payments for white indentured servants,

drove a hard wedge between poor white and poor black people, who had sometimes joined forces against the white elite.

Deena Hayes-Greene: Why do you think, after we talked about what happened in 1640 with John Punch, an African running away with a Dutchman and a Scotsman; [and] 1676, Bacon's Rebellion, gathered people of every description that saw themselves in a similar condition; why do you think it was necessary in 1705 for this statute in Virginia that required masters to give white servants fifty acres of land, thirty shillings, ten bushels of corn and a musket?

Woman in distance: To keep the white workers from siding with the black workers.

Deena Hayes-Greene: That's right. That was part of this all-class collaboration. It's like, give them something. If you don't give them something, they're all going to get together and take over.

[Music]

John Biewen: Deena goes on this way, ticking off government benefits set aside for white people, now post-revolution, in the United States of America.

Deena Hayes-Greene: 1785, the Land Ordinance Act. Because we had been taking Native land for over a century, by any means necessary, and distributing it. And it was a

very informal process but it came with some problems. There were border disputes and overlapping claims….

John Biewen: So, the Land Ordinance Act provided a clearer system for putting formerly Native land into the hands of white settlers.

Deena Hayes-Greene: This was 640 acres at a dollar an acre, was part of that.

John Biewen: The committee that drafted the Land Ordinance Act was led by Thomas Jefferson, the noted Anglo-Saxonist. The law helped to build a nation of white landowners.

Deena Hayes-Greene: It's also how we created the sort of townships that we have. There would be thirty-six square units. Unit number sixteen was set aside for public education. So we can see since 1785, we've made some contribution, some thought around public education and how necessary it was.

John Biewen: A public education system designed to serve white children, not enslaved African children or Native Americans.

[Music]

John Biewen: Fast forward. The Homestead Act of 1862, allowing people to claim land for free in the rapidly expanding United States. At first the Act excluded the vast majority of black people in the U.S., because you had to be a citizen to participate and enslaved people were not eligible for citizenship until passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1866. The Homestead Act ultimately transferred ten percent of all the land in the U.S. to regular citizens. That land went to white people disproportionately, because of that initial exclusion and because of racist practices in the distribution of the land. But many families of color did benefit, at least temporarily. The Homestead Act helps explain how African Americans came to own fifteen million acres of farmland by the early 20th century. Most of those black farmers would lose their land, though, in large part because of 20th century racism within the U.S. Agriculture Department.

Deena Hayes-Greene: Now I want to skip down here and talk about something that's reached into our lives. 1929, eight months into President Hoover's presidency, the stock market crashes. Five thousand banks close, people were losing their jobs every day.

John Biewen: Franklin Delano Roosevelt is elected in 1932, promising a New Deal. The result is a raft of initiatives that go on to build massive middle-class wealth in the United States.

Deena Hayes-Greene: If you wanted to buy a house prior to the Federal Housing Administration that was created in 1934, what were the terms? How much cash? Yes, a lot, fifty percent. So you had to have fifty percent or more paid in cash, and have it paid

off in ten years, less than ten years, usually the terms were three to five years. So home ownership was really reserved for wealthy people, not a lot of people owned, so….

John Biewen: The Federal Housing Administration changes that, it allows much smaller down payments and the thirty-year mortgage we now take for granted.

Deena Hayes-Greene: Low interest rate, low mortgage payments. Created a demand for housing that we had never seen before in this country. Homeownership went from around less than thirty percent to almost seventy percent, so it [more than] doubled. Where are the new homes being built? They're being built in the suburbs.

John Biewen: Every economist will tell you: for working-class and middle-class people, home ownership is the most powerful way to build some kind of wealth to pass on to the next generation. But, famously, government policies pushed the practice of redlining, giving those FHA loans to people in predominantly white neighborhoods and communities and refusing to loan to people in mostly-black areas—generally the only places black people were allowed to live.

Deena Hayes-Greene: You don't loan here, you don't build infrastructure, you don't develop. So they would be destroying the value of inner-city housing for decades, and they would be increasing the value and sustaining the value of communities and homes that white people owned outside of the central city area.

[Music]

Deena Hayes-Greene: Between 1933 and 1962, they would give out over 120 billion dollars in home loans and business loans. The inflation calculation says the impact of that 120 billion dollars today would be the financial impact of $2,150,949,618,320 dollars and 61 cents. And over 98 percent of that went to white people.

John Biewen: We're not through. Social Security. It helps all Americans now, but when it was first created in 1935, it excluded domestic and agricultural workers, who of course were disproportionately people of color. Two-thirds of all African American workers were blocked from Social Security until the program was expanded in the 1950s.

[Music]

Next. One of the most massive policy initiatives ever undertaken by the U.S. government was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill of Rights. Among other things, the program sent veterans of World War Two, and later the Korean and Vietnam Wars, to college. On paper, the GI Bill made no racial distinctions. But, here's Deena again.

Deena Hayes-Greene: What was the education climate like regarding race in the 1940s, 50s and 60s? It was segregated. Where did men of color have to go to school? Historically black colleges and universities. There were not a lot of historically black

colleges and universities. Most of them were teachers' colleges and agricultural schools. They couldn't meet the demand of people coming home, wanting to take advantage of a government sponsored education. White schools weren't letting them in, so that meant white people came home and had access to government-sponsored education in ways that people of color didn't have.

John Biewen: Millions of mostly-white men got higher education through the GI Bill and became engineers, scientists, doctors, teachers. The GI Bill also sent people to trade schools and helped veterans find jobs. But here again, men of color were at a disadvantage because of the military's racist practices back then in assigning jobs within the military.

Deena Hayes-Greene: So when people came home and met with a job counselor, a local job counselor, their duties were to line up a civilian job that matched skills you gained in the military. White men came home and became builders and welders and mechanics, and men of color came home and became dishwashers and cooks. And that has been a multi-generational situation for their families. So, it just, it pains me when we do "why people are poor" and people talk about people's choices and mindsets. To say that it's just the way they think that's responsible for their condition.

[Music]

John Biewen: From its passage in 1944 until 1971, the GI Bill spent ninety-five billion dollars on veterans, helping them buy homes, get vocational training, and start businesses. In his book, *When Affirmative Action was White*, political scientist Ira Katznelson writes that the law needed Southern support to pass, and Southern white lawmakers made sure it would be administered at the local level and would respect the quote-unquote "customs" of Jim Crow. Private mortgage lenders, employers, and trade schools turned away black applicants. So even though some people of color did benefit from the GI Bill, the overall effect of the law, Katznelson says, was to vastly widen the wealth and opportunity gaps between white and black Americans.

Deena Hayes-Greene: So, in white families, money travels very differently. It travels from parent to adult child, in the form of some kind of assistance. Not a big trust fund. But it might be that I can give you a down payment on a home. I can help you with school, pay for it or help you or give you some assistance, buy your books. I can buy you a car so you can work while you're in school. I have a home you can live in while you're saving money. I have social security as you're making your way and paying your bills; you don't have to take care of me and your father. In families of color because of this history, money travels from adult child to parent.

[Music]

John Biewen: Looking at all this history together, it's not hard to see why the median white household today has 13 times the assets—the wealth—of the average black

household. In fact, because of this history, the average white family headed by someone who never finished high school has more generational wealth, more money, more assets, than the average black household headed by someone with a college degree.

Deena Hayes-Greene: Now, I want to go back and say, ask you: If affirmative action is race-based access to institutional resources and opportunities, when was it legislated? [Pause] Hmm? 1618. Is this affirmative action, if you're white you get fifty acres of land, thirty shillings, ten bushels of corn and a musket solely based on the color of your skin, not for any other reason? What about the Naturalization Act of 1790, says if you're white you can become a citizen. This isn't about anything except the color of your skin. Not merit, not hard work, not meeting the criteria, just being white, the color of your skin. You have access to a loan, you have access to a neighborhood. You can live in this neighborhood if you're white. So, was this country built on affirmative action for white people?

[Music]

John Biewen: At the top of the episode, we heard from two white participants in the REI workshop. I sat down with each of them after Deena's talk.

Kathryne Foster: I can't find anything in it to be proud of, who I am. And even though my story or my parents' story or my grandparents' story is reality, was it built on lies?

Or, do you know what it feels like to be the last to find something out? Everybody around you knows something that you don't know? That's how I feel.

John Biewen: Kathryne Foster is 43. She told me she'd been required to attend the anti-racism workshop as part of an internship she was doing at the time.

Kathryne Foster: I'm an intern and I'm also a court-appointed child advocate for abused and neglected children, and I'm working on my Master's Degree for Social Work. Because I want to advocate for oppressed and vulnerable groups.

John Biewen: Kathryne tells me she's married to an African American man and they have children of color and live in a predominantly black neighborhood in Charlotte. And yet, or maybe all the more *because* of those facts of her life, Kathryne is hit hard by Deena's talk about affirmative action, and the workshop in general.

John Biewen, to Kathryne: One thing I would say about this experience is, it can give the overall sense of racism being much, much deeper and more pervasive than most of us think. Is that one way of saying what you're feeling?

Kathryne Foster: Yes, yes. It's much deeper, and very hurtful. And just a pervasive pattern that I don't know right now what my next step needs to be to help stop it. The truth of the matter is, this is sensitive, and more sensitive for some people than it is

others, and [voice cracking] I just don't know what to do with where I am right now. Yeah.

John Biewen: The issues and the history *are* more sensitive for some people than others.

Dan Pliszka: Um, you know, I don't think that I had any real particular reaction to the affirmative action thing.

John Biewen: Dan Pliszka is 60. He's manager of the risk management division, dealing with things like insurance, for the city, county, and school system in Charlotte. Surprisingly, to me, he says he didn't learn anything new from Deena's affirmative action talk. While driving into the workshop that morning, recording an audio diary, Dan had talked about his attempt a few years ago to start his own consulting business. The business didn't succeed.

Dan Pliszka, driving: I could not take advantage of some of the programs that are available for minority and women-owned businesses. And that makes me question whether or not that mechanism really is fair. I have a fundamental disagreement with it. But if it's put together and deemed to be legal, I have no choice but support those type of activities.

John Biewen: Dan is originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He says there was economic stratification among white people, too, and he talks about the anti-Polish sentiment that some people in his family faced at one time. He seizes on a couple of things from the workshop that seem to undercut the central point, that white racism toward people of color is *the* big problem, the central story in American life. One is the topic of colorism within the black community, that came up during one session.

Dan Pliszka: The thing it opened my eyes to very much was the fact that racism exists even within the racial groups. And I think it's something that maybe we don't talk about.

John Biewen: And, during talk about racism toward Asians, a presenter mentioned a stereotyping joke that Chris Rock told during an Oscars broadcast.

Dan Pliszka: I really appreciated the fact that when they talked about Chris Rock mocking Asians, that that is not okay. And yet he was not called out for it. Nobody said anything until a number of days later. And I've had some real issues with Chris Rock thinking that he can pull off African American, black jokes that if I tried to say something like that it just could not fly, would not fly. And so there's a disparity there that I have a hard time equalizing and figuring out. So, do we have problems? Absolutely. We have problems, but it's not just black-white, Asian-white, it's everybody.

[Music]

John Biewen: Hey Chenjerai, how're you doing?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey what's going on, John, how're you doing, man?

John Biewen: Doing all right. But I just have, you know, my question for you today is, what are we going to do about all this reverse racism out here?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [Laughs.] Yeah. Reverse racism.

John Biewen: Chenjerai Kumanyika, media scholar at Rutgers, journalist and podcaster, organizer and artist. As usual in this series, he and I got together on the phone to unpack things.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You know, I don't know man. I feel like when it comes to racism, I'm like, black people, we've probably got some catching up to do if we're going to try to—I mean, what institutional arrangement do black people control where we could be enacting reverse racism? Right?

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I just, I mean, and even if you can like think of something right now, this is 2017. To do it right, we would really need a time machine, like the comedian Aamer Rahman says, you have to go back, we'd have to go back and enslave white people, then release them from slavery, like sharecropping, and then incarcerate them, and then we'd have to invent something like Jim Crow, something like pigeon crow or something, and then we'd have to like redline, and then we'd have to like, you know. It just seems like there's so much catching up we'd have to do, to do reverse racism, you know.

John Biewen: Yeah, 400 years. You get a lot of….

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. So, but I mean, there are some areas where, in my little universe that I control, I might be doing some things that are a little funny. Like, for example, I don't, I will acknowledge I don't go to white barbers.

John Biewen: [Laughs.] Racist.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [Laughs.] It's true. It doesn't matter how good they are. You know what I mean?

John Biewen: Wow.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean it is not just, it ain't just skin color. They got to be able to cut, don't get it twisted. There's a lot of black barbers that can't cut. But you know, I would never, I would never say never. But I don't I don't have a plan where I'm gonna experience the white Barber who can cut. So on that level, they might have an argument about reverse racism.

John Biewen: Okay. Well and yes, you told me about the micro-reparations on the treadmill.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right.

John Biewen: But okay, so what did you hear in the reactions to the workshop from the folks that I talked to, the white folks who were there as participants, Kathryne and Dan?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. Well, you know, I mean with Kathryne, I understand what she's struggling with. It's a lot to process. She just got all that knowledge dropped on her by Deena Hayes-Greene. And I mean if you're just learning, like if you've been living with this information or stuff like that for a while, maybe it's not as big of a deal, but if you're just getting that and realizing like your whole identity as a white woman, and your whole world is built on lies, and you know, that kind of oppression, to grapple with that

really in an honest way, this means you have to kind of find a new way to be in the world. So I get that. And you hear her kind of struggling with that, is what I hear with Kathryne. But you know, my empathy has a limit because so many of us have been already living in that world. So I think too about the privilege for her to be at whatever age she's at and just kind of coming to grips with this.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And then the other thing is, I just think about how much was needed to bring her to a point of facing some things about this country and about whiteness that a lot of people already get. I mean, she had to be in a workshop that she paid for, and then be forced to listen to this history since 1618, and then all of that just for her to begin to grapple and go, Hmm, maybe, you know, maybe whiteness, maybe there's some problems, you know…. And it's like, I guess I'm glad somebody is doing that work. But I don't know if it's worth our energy as black and brown people to drag folks kicking and screaming to acknowledge some, you know, some of these basic facts.

John Biewen: Yeah, I guess what you're saying is it feels pretty overwhelming to think that if you can have a workshop that is that concentrated, in terms of— and that kind of well done, with this serious dose of information, and how many people can do it?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. That's what it takes?!

John Biewen: And apparently REI is in great demand and they're doing these all the time.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm glad.

John Biewen: But then Dan sits through that session and apparently is completely unmoved.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh. Yeah, man.

John Biewen: And I guess what I heard from Dan, with all respect to Dan, was, you know, a kind of deflecting strategy, whether conscious or unconscious. And he says yes, racism is a problem, including white racism, but there's racism in all directions. And you know he's treating racism, again, as just a matter of attitudes and prejudices. So, black folks engaging in colorism, or Chris Rock telling a joke that stereotypes Asian people, which, let's be clear, he shouldn't have done that. But Dan seems to be kind of flattening things out so that those, that kind of racism is the same as systemic institutional racism that has given most of the spoils to white people for hundreds of years. Right? So, it also seems to be kind of a way of ending the conversation when he says that. Well, you know, we all have, there's racism that goes in all directions.

But what do you think about this idea, though, that you hear, that since we've had affirmative action in the modern sense now for forty or fifty years, that provides some kind of institutional access to people of color and women, that that's, you know, by now, hasn't that taken care of the debt? And isn't it time to stop all this stuff and declare ourselves colorblind from now on?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh yeah, well that's a perfect way to maintain a racial hierarchy, right? Like you know, you climb this ladder that's built on exploitation, and then when other people try to find ways to make a sustainable life, then you kick the ladder away. Right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And you're like, oh, you get up here on your own. It's like, and not just get up here on your own but let's turn a blind eye to how we got here. Right?

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So you know, I mean, and I just listen to those moves, when I listen to like the mental games that Dan was kind of playing as he tried to come to grips with this, you ever hear that phrase, “watch whiteness work”?

John Biewen: Yeah. Actually I see it on Twitter a lot.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. And I think in this series we've seen that whiteness works a lot of ways, but in this space where there's like this willful denial, at the same time there's ignorance but then there's like this denial, you know, you can just look past evidence. Deena Hayes-Greene lays out all his history, all this evidence, all these facts, she's naming each policy, this and that, then it's like, you know, you're really just going to look past all of that?! And it's just like “Oh, well, yeah, sure. We got problems.”

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, there's something about that. Right? And I think that when the case is made for you like that, and you still cannot acknowledge what that means, you have to flatten it out, make everything even-steven, that's not somebody who doesn't get it. I think that's somebody, I mean, on the surface it just looks like ignorance, but now you can't say it's ignorance because this case was just made for you.

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So to me that's not somebody who doesn't get it. That's somebody who gets it and kind of refuses to acknowledge it because they have some sense of what they're going to have to give up. And they have some sense that this is going to mean, coming to grips with this means I'm going to have to change the world I'm comfortable with.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But one of the things I'm curious about is, I mean Dan, he heard this information, and Dan clearly has a lot of things that he needs to learn. But John, you were in this workshop and I know you came to this workshop probably with a lot of information already about some of this stuff, because I know you've reported on it, and yet you said that it was eye opening for you. So I'm interested to know what was eye opening about this for you.

John Biewen: Yeah. I guess, as I said in the introduction, I had heard some pieces of this presentation but a fair bit of the actual pieces of information I had never heard before. And then it was sort of the cumulative effect that it presented, you know, the picture that it presented. And you know, certainly—so it becomes more this sort of thing where you think you kind of know something but then you discover that you know it at a much deeper and more, you know, in a kind of different scale. And so it was like, first of all, one takeaway was just this, you know, sort of being presented again, kind of hit over the head with the fact that white supremacy is a feature of the national story. It's not a bug. Right? As we've talked about several times, that the country was built to be a nation by and for white people with other folks here as second- or third-class citizens at best, if not as enslaved people who are simply being used for the enrichment of white people. So, to have that—I think there are lots of things in our culture, when you're white, that are reassuring us over and over again that the country is basically noble, that the country basically means well.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh yeah. All the time.

John Biewen: And I guess my experience is having to learn over and over again, you know, the lesson that that's kind of a dream.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Because all those spaces where we try to position America as this force for good, and don't really want to look at that history, I mean those are spaces

where that history is being erased. And where, you know—James Baldwin said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it's faced.” And you know, so for me it's just, why is it so hard to recognize the way that white supremacy was built into this country? I mean it's, even a cursory glance at history. It's in the law, it's in businesses, it’s in educational canons, what you have to study, who you have to study. It's in the so-called justice system. It’s just so baked in. And then on top of that, white people have fought to maintain that in so many ways through so many periods of history, including now. It's miraculous that it's even controversial to bring this up.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But given that, I get why that might have been, how hearing this particular story about, you know, of white support, could be paradigm shifting or, you know what I mean?

John Biewen: Yeah. And another takeaway for me I guess was, by hearing this history of government support, benefits, handouts, whatever you want to call it—and by the way, you know, I'm glad that the government did these things for people. I'm glad that the government created the FHA and made it easier for regular people to buy homes….

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Me too.

John Biewen: …and send veterans to college. The issue of course is that huge numbers of people were excluded from these things because of racism. But the history just puts into stark relief how truly wrongheaded it is that we have so much—and we're hearing this term and I don't remember hearing it so often up until recently, but terms like “white grievance” and “white resentment.” The fact that white people are sitting around having grievances on the basis of race is [laugh.] in the face of this history is just absurd.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, and I mean I'm not here to, you know, it doesn't get me very far to be mad at individual white people because they don't get it. But a dominant cultural logic where you just can't put stuff into perspective—I mean, John, listen, I work hard as hell. My mother and grandparents worked even harder than I do. But if I'm being honest, you know, and I face the exploitation that produces the products I consume, and that contributes to my income as a professor when there's all these other people further down who don't get what they're supposed to get, and all the hidden forms of women labor, you know, in my family that makes it possible for me to do what I do, and then I look at the accumulated effect of that on, historically. The only logical conclusion is that I'm a beneficiary of exploitation! Right? Like I benefit from it! So if I can admit that and then I take some responsibility for that as an African-American, how in the hell can some white people not do that? Like, I don't know.

John Biewen: Well, and it takes me back to the conversation the last time we talked, when we talked about culture. And there's just, the culture of whiteness just doesn't, there's not much space for that. It's not part of it very often, is it, just this kind of, let's acknowledge that the life that we live is in very real ways based on the exploitation of other people. We don't acknowledge that.

The other word that that comes to mind if I think about sort of what struck me about the experience and the talk was, is complicity. That if you're white and you've lived in the U.S. for more than a few minutes, you've almost certainly benefited from white supremacy and very likely in tangible, dollars-and-cents ways. So if you're white, you know, you can't really make that claim to having been on the sidelines and not a party to this story of exclusion and exploitation, because you have benefited from it. And for that, and so any whining that you're doing that other people are getting things they don't deserve or are, you know—and it's just striking to me that very often some of the most privileged and affluent people in our society are the ones who are most likely to be upset that, you know, that poor people of color are, as Dan put it, looking to have something "bestowed" on them. "The takers." Was it Mitt Romney's term? But this idea that somebody is getting special treatment or getting something that they didn't earn, in

the face of this history, just looks silly if it weren't so profoundly wrongheaded.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, I think a lot of people don't feel party to it, like I think a lot of people feel like they didn't individually discriminate. And so they're not responsible. But you know, that's how attitudes work, right? That's how individual acts of hate work. But when you have institutionalized a power arrangement that creates paths of least resistance, that means that you've set up this society in a way where all everybody has to do is go through it in the way that's least hard, that's convenient, everybody just has to wake up and do what's convenient, what's the easiest, and they'll be reproducing that system. And so what it really means is that you benefit from this system and you reproduce it just because you woke up everyday and did what was the easiest thing to do to get through.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I think that that kind of power, and that kind of process of benefitting, is what we have to come to grips with.

[Music]

John Biewen: Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika. Our editor on the series is Loretta Williams.

Next time: the season finale. We've got to take a break and regroup, make some new work. But before we go, in part fourteen, we'll look at the question of, well, in the face of all this, what do we do? How do we make it right, or less wrong?

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