

Scene on Radio

A Racial Cleansing in America (Seeing White, Part 9) Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-39-a-racial-cleansing-in-america-seeing-white-part-9/>

[Sound: Driving.]

John Biewen: Silas House knows about the power of stories. He's a fiction writer. He still lives where he grew up, on the outskirts of Corbin, Kentucky.

Silas House: Well, Corbin is what I think of as being right at the gateway to Appalachian Kentucky. You know, you can see these beautiful mountains, but it's not so deep in the mountains that it's isolated. We're right here on the Interstate, and the railroad's always been a big part of Corbin and sort of kept it connected with the larger world. So, it's in the foothills. And I think Corbin identifies very much as a little Appalachian town, and are proud of that heritage. A little town that prides itself on being friendly and clean and all those things, you know.

John Biewen: Silas drives me around Corbin in his pickup.

Silas House: This is the original Sanders Cafe, which is the first Kentucky Fried Chicken. And Colonel Sanders lived, I don't know, two or three blocks back through there. And actually there are a lot of people that come, you wouldn't believe the number of people that come to get their picture made right there.

John Biewen: Colonel Sanders opened his first cafe in the 1930's. But there's another defining event in Corbin's history that the local tourist commission does not talk about. There's no plaque for this one. The town's official histories make no reference to the riot by the white mob.

Silas House: So it's, you know, amazing, the ramifications of something that happened in 1919 and how that can reverberate so many years later and affect people that don't even know the story.

[Music]

John Biewen: I'm John Biewen. It's *Scene on Radio*, part nine of our series, *Seeing White*. Exploring the meaning of whiteness and how it works in the world.

Once in awhile you come across an American town or county that has long been virtually all white, even though surrounding communities have substantial populations of color. Chances are that's not an accident. Between the 1860s and the 1920s or so, in a whole bunch of rural places, white mobs violently expelled virtually all their Black neighbors. Ten years ago, I read a book about some of those communities. Out of all the places where such a thing happened—including Forsyth County, Georgia; Lawrence County, Missouri; Boone and Sharp Counties in Arkansas; Vermillion County, Indiana—I decided to go to

Corbin, Kentucky and talk to people because it seemed like a place where the silence was especially deafening.

If you've been listening to *Seeing White*, you'll notice this story is similar in spirit to our *Little War on the Prairie* episode, about my home town in Minnesota. It's a story not just about what happened, but about that silence, and what it says about white America.

Lora Smith: I think that the first time I realized that there was something was wrong with where I was from, I think that I was probably around six or seven at the time....

John Biewen: Lora Smith was in her twenties when she and I met up in Corbin ten years ago. She has long blond hair. Her family has been in Corbin for generations. Lora says when she was a child, she and her mother were driving to Lexington when they ran out of gas.

Lora Smith: Um, this really nice man stopped and picked us up and said I'll take you to the gas station and bring you back, and he was African American. And we got in the car, and he's, you know, just talking to us, talking to my mom, and finally came around, Where you all from? And my mom just looked over and said, "we're from Williamsburg."

John Biewen: Meaning Williamsburg, Kentucky, which is 17 miles from Corbin.

Lora: And I was shocked. Because my mom was lying! I remember sitting in the back seat and just taking that all in and the gears starting to turn and just being like, okay, there's something not okay with telling people, especially, you know, African American people, that we're from Corbin.

Lueverda Boose: Well. [Sigh.] Years back, it was very, very sad situation in Corbin. My name is Lueverda Boose. I was born in Knox County, 19 and 27.

John Biewen: Mrs. Boose lives in Barbourville, 15 miles southeast of Corbin. It's another nearby town, like Williamsburg, where there's long been a significant Black population. But Corbin is the railroad hub for this part of Kentucky. So, in the days of passenger trains, that meant Black folks going home to Barbourville had to use the Corbin station.

Lueverda Boose: They would be scared to even get off the train. Face facts, it was a very dangerous situation to come to Corbin. African Americans. It really was.

John Biewen: Mrs. Boose is not afraid of Corbin anymore. On a Saturday in winter, she's sitting in an apartment there while her grand-niece, Tammy Rogers, gets her hair styled by her friend David Slone.

[Sound: Water running.]

Tammy Rogers: You are smart today!

David: Ooh, I'm enjoying this! ...

John Biewen: This is David Slone's apartment. He was one of about ten African Americans living in Corbin when I visited in 2007, out of about eight thousand people in the town. David moved to town in 2005 to escape Biloxi, Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. He met Tammy Rogers at a mostly-Black Baptist church in Barbourville.

Tammy: When David said he was living in Corbin, I thought that was quite ... strange. I laughed, actually. [Laughs.]

John Biewen: David didn't know until he arrived in town that he was moving to a virtually all-white place with a notorious, if mostly whispered, racial history.

David Slone: When I first came up here, I had a little toddler walk up to me and rub me on the back of the hand and look at his hand. And I told him, it didn't rub off, it's permanent. He wasn't used to seeing Black people.

[Music: “Darktown Strutter’s Ball.”]

John Biewen: The main reason a child in Corbin wouldn’t be used to seeing Black people dates back almost a century. In 1919, the race climate in the U.S. was tense and violent.

Adriane Lentz-Smith: It’s important not to underplay the severity and the extent of the oppression, of sort of white violence, of economic oppression, of legal structures....

John Biewen: Adriane Lentz-Smith is a history professor, now at Duke. She wrote *Freedom Struggles*, a book about African Americans during World War One. Before the Great War, in the decades after the Civil War, she says, Black Americans were in crisis. The short period of Reconstruction, which allowed Black political and economic participation like never before, was crushed between 1890 and 1910. Southern states rewrote their laws and constitutions, essentially locking Black Americans out of citizenship.

Adriane Lentz-Smith: You get this period I think, first, where African Americans are just trying to figure out what on earth happened. And then, how they live within it without being attacked, you know, and so...

John Biewen: In the **early** 1910s, she says, white supremacy had a triumphant hold on the country under President Woodrow Wilson. But the first world war shook things up, and created new openings. Of the two million U.S. soldiers sent to the battle in Europe, almost 400 thousand were Black.

Adriane Lentz-Smith: It gives African Americans a way to reassert rhetorically their place in the nation. We are loyal Americans, we have served in every military conflict in American history since before there was an America, and we will serve in this one again. The sort of idea that it's a war for democracy, for autonomy, the defense of the people deciding their own fate. That gives African Americans a way of saying, Oh really, if we're fighting for democracy abroad, what are we doing at home?

John Biewen: At the same time, she says, the Great War slowed immigration to a trickle. So cities outside the South, with their industries ramped up for the war effort, needed labor they weren't getting from overseas. Between 1915 and 1920 alone, hundreds of thousands of Black people moved out of the Deep South to take those jobs. Seeing African Americans assert themselves in these ways, to try to improve their lives, didn't go over well with a lot of white people.

Adriane Lentz-Smith: In some ways, white laborers defined themselves as worthy people, or, you know, one step up on some sort of ladder of status, precisely because they had Black laborers as one step down, as a sort of

counterpoint—what W.E.B. Du Bois calls a ‘psychological wage.’ You know, that white supremacy robs working class whites of so much, but the one thing they have is the guarantee that Black people still occupy a space below them.

John Biewen: Lynchings, which had declined in the first years of the twentieth century, headed back upward during and after the war, dozens of them reported every year.

Adriane Lentz-Smith: These are only the lynchings that we know about.

[Music]

John Biewen: In the East St. Louis riot of 1917, white men turned on Black people over labor and racial grievances. Forty African Americans and eight whites were killed. By 1919, things were even worse.

Adriane Lentz-Smith: What happens in Kentucky exists in the context of the Red Summer, which is a summer of race riots, at minimum twenty-five, in places as far flung as Chicago and Longview, Texas, or Charleston, South Carolina.

[Music]

John Biewen: In Corbin, Kentucky, the 1910 census found sixty Black residents. By 1919, another two hundred or so Black men were working in Corbin on temporary crews, paving streets and expanding the railroad yard. Then that autumn ...

Voiceover: Corbin Times. Wednesday night occurred a highway robbery near the C.V. Bridge, when A.F. Thompson, switchman, 34 years old, was held up by two Negroes as he was nearing home from his work....

John Biewen: The day after this alleged mugging of a white man on October 29th, word passed in town that something was about to happen. These are excerpts from affidavits signed a few months later by longtime Black residents Alex Tye and John Turner.

Voiceover, Alex Tye: At about eleven o'clock on the night of October 30th, my wife Annie Tye called me to look at a crowd of men going in the direction of John Turner's house....

Voiceover, John Turner: They swore at us and said, By God we are going to run all negroes out of this town tonight.

Voiceover, Alex Tye: I saw Steve Rogers on the porch of the Lyttles' home, hammering on the door, calling on the crowd to break in the door and bring them out, and hang them if they didn't come out.

Voiceover, John Turner: The Fireman, Bob Smith, held a gun to my head....

Voiceover: Alex Tye: So the three of us got out through the back window and went over the top of the hill in the back of my house.

Voiceover, John Turner: My wife and I were taken to the Depot and herded there with a large number of Negroes, and compelled to leave Corbin.

[Sound: Train going away.]

Elliot Jaspin: By the end of this, all but three Blacks had been sent packing. The mob leaders decided that these three, who had been there for years and were "harmless," in their view, they could stay. Everybody else had to leave.

John Biewen: Journalist Elliot Jaspin wrote that book I mentioned earlier. It's called *Buried in the Bitter Waters: the Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America*. Jaspin spent five years researching places like Corbin – places where white people violently expelled virtually all the Black people in their communities at some point between the Civil War and the 1920's.

[Music]

John Biewen: He tells of more than a dozen expulsions ... in places from Central Texas through the Ozarks and parts of Indiana ... into Appalachia and northern Georgia. Notice, these places are not in the Deep South. There, African Americans often outnumbered white people and their labor was essential to Deep South economies. Jaspin found most of the expulsions happened where Black people were a smaller minority. They were expendable, he says.

Elliot Jaspin: It's kind of an arc that goes across the United States. The counties are typically rural, along the Mason-Dixon line. In a sense it's become America's family secret. I found so many that I eventually had to limit the story that I eventually wrote to only those counties where the racial cleansing had been successful. Which is to say, it remains white or virtually all-white today.

[Sound: Train.]

John Biewen: In Corbin the railroad yard is still there, just off the charming Main Street. So is the depot where a couple hundred African Americans boarded trains at gunpoint on that night in 1919. In the Corbin public library you can find this article in the local newspaper archives.

Voiceover: Corbin Times, November 7, 1919. In the matter of news there is nothing that The Times can add to what has already been said about the terrible calamity that befell Corbin last Thursday night in the way of that mob...

John Biewen: I took a copy of that article to Don Estep. He was publisher of Corbin's current weekly paper, the *News Journal*. Estep is a lifelong Corbin resident. He was 67 when I met him. He told me he'd never seen the article before, and had always heard a more benign version of what happened in 1919.

Don Estep: Well until I'd read this, I didn't know there was a mob spirit. But they are openly, in this article written in 1919, calling it a *mob*. **[Reading.]** "Our name has gone out..." Very interesting part of this, written in 1919, I think, is this: "Our name has gone out over the nation with a black spot that can never be removed." Wow.

Elliot Jaspin: As a way to deal with this very uncomfortable history, what I see again and again, and this is certainly in Corbin, is that they develop a fable.

John Biewen: Author Elliot Jaspin.

Elliot Jaspin: In Corbin, the fable was that there was a Black work crew that came into town that caused trouble and they were told to leave.

John Biewen: The mayor of Corbin is Willard McBurney, a retired postal service manager.

Willard McBurney: People in my peer group, they said they had heard from their grandfathers, or from their dads, and it was just really passed on down from generation ... from generations. And that's really the gist of my knowledge of this.

Biewen, off-mic: And what version, what was it?

McBurney: Well I heard that there was a group one night that forced a bunch of the Blacks out of Corbin. But then, I've heard that it wasn't to that severity – that, you know, they were employed by the railroad company and they did move some out. But then they brought them back in two weeks later to finish the job.

John Biewen: That is, the railroad brought in another crew of *Black* workers. In this version of the story, that's proof that the expulsion was not about race. In fact, in affidavits collected for the state's criminal investigation several months later, white eyewitnesses backed up the story told by the African American men. They said the armed mob announced its intention to rid Corbin of Black people, and that Black baggage workers who tried to return a few days later were threatened and left again.

Voiceover, Dr. B.J. Edwards affidavit: I know that some of the negroes who were compelled to leave Corbin were property owners and had always been considered peaceful and law-abiding.

Voiceover, A.C. Martin affidavit: I do not consider that it would be safe for any of the Negroes to return to Corbin, Kentucky at the present time.

John Biewen: As a result of the investigation in 1919, a man named Steve Rogers, who worked for the railroad, was convicted of leading the mob and spent two years in the Kentucky state penitentiary.

A lot of people in Corbin say there's no point in dwelling on something that happened so long ago. That's how Mayor McBurney feels. But at the same time, he admits the expulsion haunts his town and its image.

Willard McBurney: I had to go to a marketing meeting in Cincinnati....

John Biewen: McBurney remembers an incident from the late 1980's when he was working for the postal service.

Willard McBurney: There was probably over a hundred of us at this meeting....

John Biewen: The main speaker at the meeting was an African American who'd flown in from Chicago.

Willard McBurney: And he was going through the plans and how they would do this and that and if any of us had any problems, he says, Hey, I'll personally come down and work with you on that. But, he says, and he pointed his finger at me. He said, I won't come to Carbon. That's what he called Corbin. And that really made me feel small. To be singled out with other people like that. I knew that he had heard of the stigma that has followed Corbin. And I mean, that was someone from Chicago.

John Biewen: For decades after the 1919 race riot, Corbin was known as a "white man's town" with a visible Klan presence, a town that would tolerate only a token handful of Black people. The criminal investigation did find that several whites stood up to the mob. A few protected Black people in their homes or businesses. And, as you heard, the local newspaper condemned the expulsion at the time. Journalist Elliot Jaspin says most people in Corbin, and the other towns where racial expulsions took place, don't know this part of their history, either.

Elliot Jaspin: When you have the fable, the heroic acts of the people in the community are lost. They lose their heroes.

[Sound: Driving.]

John Biewen: Writer Silas House thinks white people in a place like Corbin are especially reluctant to talk about their town's troubled past because of worries about eastern Kentucky stereotypes.

Silas House: Well, people think we're all illiterate, ignorant hillbillies who are also racist and misogynistic and homophobic....

John Biewen: But the decades of silence from Corbin's leaders may have backfired. Silas says by failing to publicly own up to the 1919 expulsion, Corbin has missed the chance to move past it.

Silas House: It was certainly talked about when I was a child and teenager and people still talk about it, but not to outsiders. I think it's important to talk about for several reasons. Number one, you know, just to shed light on something that awful happening. Number two, it's important to know about the place you're from. Storytelling is important. And number three, it's important to talk about because I don't think that we live in that kind of place anymore, and, you know, to maybe shed some light on how different it is today.

[Sound: Church band, singers—choir and congregation] Come, just as you are to worship. Come....

John Biewen: On the edge of Corbin, a congregation more than a century old meets in a sprawling, much newer building. Senior Pastor Tim Thompson of the First United Methodist Church says in August 2005, he was sitting in his office with some of his staff.

Tim Thompson: We're watching the news, and this thing has just wiped out New Orleans and Biloxi and all that coast line down there....

John Biewen: Thompson and his staff decided to turn their church into emergency housing for people who'd lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina.

Tim Thompson: I went before the whole church on Sunday morning and said, here's what we want to do. We raised the issue: We're certain some of the folks that are gonna come and live with us are gonna be Black. We're certain of that. And we just said, whatever! Whoever comes, we don't care, it doesn't matter, we'll deal with it, it'll be fine. And so the congregation said, Okay.

John Biewen: The church hosted about 25 people from the Gulf Coast. They stayed in the church for weeks, or months. About half were African American.

Tim Thompson: Our hope was that maybe a few of the Black folks that came would stay here and live and become a Corbinite, live in Corbin and essentially

become pioneers. So fifteen or twenty years from now there's a growing population of Black people in this town.

[Sound: Basketball game on television.]

John Biewen: But a year and a half later, almost all of the dozen or so African American guests from the Gulf Coast had gone back home or moved on to places like Louisville or Lexington. All except David Slone, who we heard at the top of the piece, cutting his friend's hair. David came to Corbin from Biloxi.

David Slone: I'm thankful that the church had the vision to open up their doors to bring us up here. I'm an adventurer, I'm a pioneer, I'll try anything once.

John Biewen: When I met David, he was working in a cabinet factory in Corbin. He said he'd gotten some cold looks in town and, he thought, unfair treatment in a couple of previous jobs.

David Slone: A lot of the people up here are stuck back in the Sixties.

John Biewen: But he said Corbin had not lived up to its old image as a sundown town, a place where a Black person better get out before dark or else. His 79-year-old friend from nearby Barbourville, Lueverda Boose, agrees. She told me these days, she likes to shop in Corbin.

Lueverda Boose: It used to be that you could walk on the street: “Oh, there go a nigger down the street.” You would hear this in Corbin, Kentucky! But now it seems to be much, much better. Now you can walk into a store, you can get a nice smile.

John Biewen: Still, some people in Corbin say their town has a lot of work to do in putting its hateful image to rest—starting with some straight talk about what really happened in 1919.

[Sound: Train.]

[Music]

Lora Smith: You know, you were here ten years ago, and I don’t think you would recognize downtown if you came back...

John Biewen: Lora Smith, the Corbin native who told the story of her mother’s lie about where they lived. I checked in with her on the phone the other day and she recorded herself. Lora’s now 38. She lives in Egypt, Kentucky.

John Biewen on phone: Egypt!

Lora Smith: Yes. [Laughs.]

John Biewen: That's awesome.

Lora Smith: Yeah, isn't that a good place name?

John Biewen: Egypt is just 45 minutes from Corbin. Her parents still live there and she's in pretty close touch with what's happening in Corbin.

Lora Smith: We have a farm-to-table restaurant downtown that features really great regional food as well as craft beers. We have a really great coffee shop that also does a great lunch and brunch....

John Biewen: Lora says with the coal economy's decline—which affects the important railroad business in Corbin—the town has had other economic successes. A new farmer's market led to other foodie businesses and the coffee shop, all owned by younger people who'd lived elsewhere and came back home.

Lora Smith: And they tend to be pretty progressive, too. So when I walk into a downtown restaurant now, one of the surprising things is that, one, it's packed, and there's actually people back downtown, which is great to see. And two, it's a lot of young people and it's very much a diverse crowd. People of color...

John Biewen: Lora doesn't know of any meaningful change in the actual Black population in Corbin. She thinks those diverse people she sees downtown are mostly just in for the day from the surrounding area.

Lora Smith: ...college students, and there's also folks that are driving down from Lexington and places like that, or are tourists who are staying in the area or on their way to other places, so I'm not sure....

John Biewen: But in the town known as the home of Colonel Sanders, you can now get a cup of Fair Trade coffee, and a local restaurant declared itself a sanctuary in the face of the Trump Administration's travel ban on Muslim countries. Corbin's vibe is increasingly inclusive, as Lora puts it. Which makes it all the more unfortunate, in her opinion, that the town still doesn't acknowledge its troubled past. There's still no public marker of any kind. In 2007, the same year a version of my piece about Corbin aired on NPR, Lora and a young newspaper reporter in town organized a display about the racial expulsion at the public library, showing some of the documents you heard about in this piece—those affidavits about the race riot...

Lora Smith: ... you know, court proceeding documents, clips from the local newspaper and also some of the national newspapers that covered it. And those were put on display at the public library for anybody to view. There weren't, there wasn't like a public dialogue around it, but they were publicly presented.

John Biewen: Also in 2007, the Corbin city government organized a lecture series on the history of the town featuring a local historian. Lora went to those lectures, and was disappointed.

Lora Smith: You know, it kinda went from the founding and kind of the early, early history of the town to jumping forward to, you know, the mid-to-late-1920s. So there was a sizeable gap of history that wasn't talked about, including the year 1919.

[Music]

John Biewen: Today, the city of Corbin's website features a history page. It includes some colorful details about the town's labor history. It even mentions some violence among railroad and timber workers in the late 19th century that it says gave the town a rough reputation at the time. But about the expulsion of hundreds of Black people in 1919, and the town's image problems as a result of that? Nothing.

Lora Smith: As somebody who's from a town where a significant race riot occurred, I think it's incredibly important that we air that and talk about it and have constructive dialogue around it, you know, and memorialize it in some way. And I think that while there are folks that would think that would be detrimental to

the town, I actually think it would be incredibly beneficial for the town and the good efforts that are happening there, for that to happen.

[Music]

Big thanks to our editor on the ongoing *Seeing White* series, Loretta Williams. My collaborator and frequent conversation partner, Chenjerai Kumanyika, got this episode off. Well, scheduling issues and whatnot, we couldn't quite pull it off this time. But he'll be back. We've got a number of juicy *Seeing White* episodes in the works. Thanks for listening and spreading the word.

Music this time by Blue Dot Sessions, Kevin MacCleod, Lee Rosevere, and Sumtimes Why.

Follow me on [Twitter @sceneonradio](#), like our [Facebook page](#). On our website, [sceneonradio.org](#), there's a link to Elliot Jaspin's book on racial cleansings, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, and to the Corbin city government's take on local history. *Scene on Radio* comes to you from CDS, the [Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University](#).