

Scene on Radio

Skulls and Skin (*Seeing White*, Part 8) Transcript

<http://podcast.cdsporch.org/episode-38-skulls-and-skins-seeing-white-part-8/>

John Biewen: There's a common assumption, or fallacy. I'm guilty of it sometimes. The idea that human knowledge moves in one direction: it progresses. In the old days, people had what we now see as silly beliefs and useless practices—the flat earth, balancing the four humors. They didn't know better. But as a species, we learn, especially since we invented real science. We had better knowledge in 1840 than in 1440 or 440 B.C., and certainly we do today. Don't we?

I'm John Biewen. It's *Scene on Radio*, Part Eight of our series, *Seeing White*. In this series, we're looking at how whiteness got constructed, how it works, and the lengths people have gone to, to reinforce it, to prove being white is a thing.

Maybe that notion of steady scientific progress does pan out more often than not in the big picture. But when it comes to notions of so-called race, and of being "white" over the centuries? As we've heard in this series, you could have asked pretty much anybody on the planet in 1400, or, say, a Greek philosopher in the 5th century B.C., "What are you?" They'd have said, "Greek." "English." "Japanese." "Zulu." If you pressed them about their "race," they might have looked at you funny and said, "Human?"

Over the last few hundred years, though, especially around here, in the United States, the timeline of our scientific thinking about human so-called races has weird detours and cul-de-sacs and loop-de-loops. Just proving again that when it comes to race thinking, it's almost never just about the facts. There's usually something else at work.

Janet Monge: The thing is that they're pretty amazing, if you haven't seen a collection like this ever? [Clanks, door sounds] I mean, it's breathtaking. And we're going into a classroom. So the classroom has the collection as 'storage in plain sight.' [Squeaking wheels.] You're already recording, I see. Okay. [Laughs.]

So, I'm Janet Monge, I'm Associate Curator and Keeper of the physical anthropology section at the Penn Museum. [Squeaks] Sorry about the squeaks...

John Biewen: And you're casually pushing a cart that has, I don't know, a dozen or so human skulls on it.

Janet Monge: Yes. It does. These were chosen.... [fades under]

John Biewen: I'm visiting the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia.

Janet Monge: It's Room 190. It's a very famous classroom on Penn's campus...

John Biewen: The museum is home to one of the world's better-known collections of human skulls. Samuel George Morton collected these skulls from the 1830s to the early 1850s. Most were sent to him by fellow doctors around the world. Morton was a pretty big deal. A physician, and President of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.

Janet Monge: He's considered the father of American physical anthropology, because of his attention, basically, to data collection and measurement. And human variation.

John Biewen: Along the walls and down the middle of the classroom are tall cases made of wood with glass doors. Their shelves are lined with skulls that look back at you through the glass, poker-faced.

Janet Monge: The original part of it, which is what Morton collected, is about 900 crania or so. So the [cranium] is the skull without the mandible, so that's why you see, basically, the skulls mostly in the collection without lower jaws associated with them. Some of them do but the bulk of them don't.

John Biewen: On the forehead of each skull is a number, written in black ink by Morton himself, and a label, also applied by Morton or an assistant almost two centuries ago. The labels say things like: “Egyptian.” “Ancient Mexican.” “Celtic Irish.” “Negro, born in Africa.” “German, lunatic.” Sitting at a table, Janet Monge takes a skull in her hands.

Janet Monge: So, this is an elderly individual. All of the teeth actually were lost well before the death of the person....

John Biewen: So, what was Samuel Morton doing with all these crania? Hour after hour, year after year, with painstaking effort, he measured them. Their insides.

Janet Monge: So you can see that the skull is actually, especially at the base but in the eye orbits and in the nose as well, pretty porous. There’s lots of gaps and holes. So he actually would have to have meticulously blocked all of those holes. Then he would fill the inside of the skull, through this big hole at the base of the skull called the foramen magnum. He would have filled the inside of the skull bones with lead shot, and then, you know, sort of swished it around, made sure it was nicely packed. And then poured it from there into a graduated cylinder, and that yielded a volume. He also measured the angle of the face, and said that it went from flat face, like of course in Europeans, to very projecting faces which he called the Orangutan type.

John Biewen: What was he up to? What was the question he was trying to answer and how was he doing it?

Janet Monge: The natural superiority of white people, of Europeans. And –

John Biewen: He, he was trying to prove that, basically.

Janet Monge: Yes. Yes! I mean, and in the best scientific terms that could be applied in his time. So this is gonna be a powerful argument. The seat of intelligence is the brain, there you go.

John Biewen: The bigger the brain, the smarter....

Janet Monge: ...the person. Yes. [Chuckles] Which of course is not true, but this was his understanding, and this was a way to get to this superiority.

[Music]

Janet Monge: Ah, yeah. [Sighs.] It's ... it's ... crazy, actually. From the perspective of people today.

John Biewen: Morton didn't know this, but there's just no correlation between the volume of an adult human brain and that person's intelligence. For starters, bigger skulls come with bigger bodies, and having a big body doesn't make you smart. Intelligence is vastly more complicated than the size of the brain pan.

Samuel Morton died in 1851. You may want to cut him slack, give him the "back then they didn't know any better" dispensation. But racial science had been around for more than a century by his time. And Morton was pushing the science, with diligent effort, in the wrong direction. Previous race theorists were somewhat less wrong than he was. In earlier episodes, we mentioned Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish Father of modern taxonomy. He's the guy who, in the mid-1700s, gave humans the Latin name *homo sapiens*.

Here's historian Nell Irvin Painter, back again. She's the author of *The History of White People*.

Nell Irvin Painter: Taxonomy was The Enlightenment. Let's make sense of this world, and make sense of this world not only in religious terms, because religion was the great classifier before The Enlightenment—so you expelled people because they were Muslim or because they were Jewish. But the Enlightenment steps back into a

dispassionate survey of the world: the rocks, the animals, the birds, the bees, the people.

John Biewen: Linnaeus made a case for four varieties of humans, based on appearance and geography: White European; Red American—that’s Native Americans; Brown Asian—later he changed his mind and called Asians Yellow; and Black African.

Then came Johan Friedrich Blumenbach, the German founder of anthropology. He named five human types in the late 1700s. And we have him to thank for the term Caucasian, drawn from the Caucasus mountain range, which is on the border of Europe and Asia. Why “Caucasian” for white people? Blumenbach somehow decided the criteria for dividing humanity should be skull shape and beauty. Coincidentally, he found that the people who looked like him were the most beautiful. And a famous book of his time had declared that the people of the Caucasus, especially Georgian women, were the most beautiful of all.

[Music]

Nell Irvin Painter: Let’s see if I can do this.

John Biewen: I asked Nell Painter to list Blumenbach’s five races.

Nell Irvin Painter: The most beautiful was the Caucasian, and then there was the Ethiopian based on a skull from **West** Africa [Laughing]. And then there was the American, and then there was the Asian, based on a skull from Siberia, and then there was the Malay, based on a skull from Tahiti.

John Biewen: Interestingly, Blumenbach’s Caucasian race went beyond Europeans and included people that wouldn’t typically be considered white today.

Nell Irvin Painter: The Caucasian group for Blumenbach included North Africa and went as far east as India and well into Russia, into what we would consider Asian Russia.

John Biewen: Blumenbach had his reasons for all this, but if it sounds arbitrary, it is. It's not surprising that, writing in 1795, Blumenbach could list twelve competing schemes of human taxonomy, cooked up by different scientists. He invited the reader to "choose which of them he likes best."

Nell Irvin Painter: The most important thing to remember is that there was never any agreement on the number of races. No agreement. There was also no agreement on those factors. What do you measure? What do you look at? How do you tell?

John Biewen: From Blumenbach's time into the early 20th century, Painter says, the factor used most often to distinguish the so-called races was skull measurement. Not the skull **capacity** scheme that Samuel Morton pursued, but shape. Something called the "cephalic index."

John Biewen: Yeah, and what was the cephalic index, basically?

Nell Irvin Painter: It was the relationship between the width and the breadth of the skull. So, if you had a long skull and you were light-skinned, that was good. And if you had a flat skull, even if you were light-skinned, that was not so good. And then if you had a long skull, but you were dark-skinned, that was **not** good. [Laughter.] So, they were brachycephalic and dolichocephalic. Yeah.

John Biewen: Those were the terms for the two main skull shapes—long and short, measured from the front of the head to the back. Generations of racial scientists used the index to explain their theories of human hierarchy. They made distinctions not just between what we think of as the major races, black and white and so on, but also between what we'd now call ethnicities. In the 20th century, eugenicists asserted that

Celts, Slavs and the quote, “Mediterranean races” had shorter skulls than the superior Teutonic and Nordic types.

John Biewen: And, I mean, what does this science look like now?

Nell Irvin Painter: It looks crazy now! [Laughs.]

John Biewen: There’s that word again. From the perspective of today’s science, all these theorists were barking up the wrong tree from the moment they set out to carve up and rank humanity. So, it almost seems unnecessary to say that Samuel Morton, the guy with the skull collection in Philadelphia, was even more mistaken than earlier scientists like Blumenbach. But he was. And it’s worth thinking about why.

Dorothy Roberts: Sure, I’m Dorothy Roberts, and I’m a professor at University of Pennsylvania...

John Biewen: She’s a legal scholar who holds an interdisciplinary professorship.

Dorothy Roberts: So, in addition to my law school appointment, I have appointments in Africana Studies and Sociology.

John Biewen: Dorothy Roberts is a leading scholar on racial science. Her latest book is called *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the 21st Century*.

To get at why science was so wrong about race for so long, first, remember what we learned back in Part Two of our series from historian Ibram Kendi. It wasn’t scientists who first pushed the idea of black and white races, one inferior to the other. It was slave traders in 15th century Portugal. Their ideas spread throughout Europe over the next couple of centuries, as a way to justify the burgeoning Atlantic slave trade. So, the West

was awash in racism by the time those Enlightenment scientists came along and started categorizing the natural world.

Dorothy Roberts: Well, I think those several centuries, the 17th century to the 20th century, scientists were developing a biological concept of race in order to support white peoples' conquest and enslavement and exploitation of other peoples.

John Biewen: I asked Roberts if that was a conscious conspiracy by racial scientists. She thinks their belief in the superiority of white people was conscious, but their misuse of science was not. Their work was distorted by their racist assumptions.

Dorothy Roberts: In other words, I don't think they consciously set out to use science to support a view that would trick people about reality. I think that they thought that their science was confirming reality. Their reality.

[Music]

Dorothy Roberts: And I think that's basically what the project was that began with European typologists in the late 1600s, into the 1700s, and then really was 'perfected' in the United States by scientists like Samuel Morton who were trying to justify enslaving human beings in a nation founded in equality and liberty and freedom for all. So, the U.S., I think, has the most elaborate scientific defense of human biological difference.

[Music]

Janet Monge: So, if you look up closely onto some of the skulls.... Just want to see one that's kind of easy to see. "Egyptian form," "Pelagic form," "Negro form." So he was actually labeling them....

John Biewen: Janet Monge says Morton had a special fascination with Egypt, and he hoped to prove certain things about it. One of his claims was that ancient Egypt was able to build a great civilization, despite being in Africa, because its rulers were white.

Janet Monge: So, based on the way they looked, he characterized them as Middle Eastern, Negro, Europe-like, all of these kinds of things, and then of course went on to say that the great peoples basically of Egypt were Middle Eastern or European in terms of form. So, proving basically again that even in this ancient culture, the superior group comes to control essentially everything that's happening in that area.

John Biewen: Really trying to give credit for Egyptian civilization to...

Janet Monge: Yes....

John Biewen: ...to whiter people.

Janet Monge: Yeah.

John Biewen: As historian Nell Painter points out, this theory has problems, including the ancient artwork that shows Egyptian rulers with black, kinky hair. But Morton was able to overlook those details. Janet Monge says, if you insist on talking about ancient Egyptians in racial or ethnic terms, they were like today's Egyptians.

Janet Monge: They're actually situated very nicely as North Africans, and very specifically as having components basically of two continental masses, pretty much. And that's just normal variation that you would see in a population, that he of course gives a race identity to.

John Biewen: Right. It's a crossroads and has been....

Janet Monge: Forever.

John Biewen: ...for a long, long time.

Janet Monge: Forever.

John Biewen: Here's something else Morton was trying to prove with his skull studies.

Janet Monge: So, he also too was a polygenist.

John Biewen: A polygenist. Meaning he rejected the Biblical story of a single pair of ancestors for humanity, instead claiming black and white people were created as separate species. This is a striking way in which Morton's scientific theories were more distorted than the race scientists who came before him. The German, Blumenbach, half a century before Morton, was a monogenist. He said—rightly, as it turns out—that all humans descended from a common ancestor, though he mistakenly assumed the first humans were white. Samuel Morton stirred together his cranial studies with claims about Biblical stories to assert that black people were a different species, between humans and apes.

Janet Monge: In other words, this is the natural order, this was made by God—basically to fulfill this promise of the superiority of the European folks, and that other folks are inferior to them and therefore should be in this inferior position. It's a very insidious argument. And you can imagine [that] the people who sort of jumped on that bandwagon had a lot of fuel that really came from his studies.

John Biewen: Morton's work gave fuel to John Calhoun, the South Carolina senator who led the fight in the 1840s to annex Texas as a slave state. Calhoun said Morton proved black people freed from slavery would just return to savagery. And Nell Painter writes of Josiah Nott, a slave-owning doctor, author, and founder of the University of Alabama School of Medicine. Nott used Morton's claims to back up his own polygenist

beliefs. He railed against abolitionists and claimed race mixing would produce infertile children—despite the evidence to the contrary all around him in the American South.

When Samuel Morton died in 1851, the Charleston Medical Journal wrote glowingly of his contributions. Janet Monge reads a quote from that statement:

Janet Monge: 'We can only say that we of the South should consider him as our benefactor, for aiding most materially in giving to the negro his true position as an inferior race.' [Pause.] Pfff. Like, sometimes I sit there and I go, like, what a creep.

John Biewen: Racist racial science would hold sway for another century after Morton. It crescendoed with the eugenics movement in the 20th century. Eugenics only got discredited after the Nazis took it to its logical, genocidal conclusion.

Scholar Dorothy Roberts says the sorry history of racial science should have come to an end, once and for all, in the year 2000.

TV footage, June 26, 2000: Band playing "Hail to the Chief," applause...

Bill Clinton: Good morning. ... We are here to celebrate the completion of the first survey of the entire human genome. Without a doubt, this is the most important, most wondrous map ever produced by humankind.

Dorothy Roberts: When the first draft of the map of the human genome was unveiled at the White House, by Bill Clinton and Craig Venter and Francis Collins, the latter two being the scientists at the helm of the private and public genome projects, they all three made it a point to mention that the project found that there was no race other than the human race, no distinct races at the genetic level.

John Biewen: The genome project found that humans have about 20-thousand genes in each of our cells. It laid out a general framework of those genes and what they do.

Bill Clinton: I believe one of the great truths to emerge from this triumphant expedition inside the human genome is that in genetic terms, all human beings regardless of race are more than 99.9% the same. What that means is that modern science has confirmed what we first learned from ancient faiths: the most important fact of life on this earth is our common humanity.

John Biewen: Humans are a young species, 200-thousand years old at most. The genome project found that superficial features like skin, hair, and eye color could evolve relatively quickly in different climates precisely because those traits are genetically simple. They're shaped by just a few genes. On the other hand, take something like intelligence. However you define it, it probably draws on thousands of genes. And geneticists say there just hasn't been enough time in human history for different populations to have evolved real differences in such a complex trait.

Dorothy Roberts says the genetic variations that do exist among humans—within that narrow 0.1 percent of the genome where we differ—simply don't line up with our notions of race. Just as gene science debunks the idea of a distinct “white” population, she says, it also explodes the notion of a “black” race. African people express most of the world's genetic diversity all by themselves, so there are Africans who are genetically similar to any other given population in the world.

Dorothy Roberts: People with ancestors from Zimbabwe are very genetically different from people with ancestors from Somalia, for example. And that difference is greater than the difference between someone from Somalia and someone from some part of Europe.

John Biewen: You got that, right? Genomic science has found that Somalis are genetically closer to Europeans than to Zimbabweans.

Still, Roberts says, despite such findings, a whole lot of us won't shake the belief that race is biological. That includes some scientists, who, for example, run the new gene data through computers looking to group humans into so-called "clusters." Depending on how you enter the data, she says, and which genetic markers you select for, the software could find 20 clusters in Africa alone. Or it could spit out, say, five gene clusters that correspond roughly to the world's land masses. Guess which of those models folks tend to be interested in?

Dorothy Roberts: The DNA doesn't naturally group itself. The computer that does the grouping has to be given instructions, and those instructions are shaped by the scientists' social expectations and social beliefs.

John Biewen: She also writes about drug companies that use assumptions of racial difference to get patents for drugs, which they then market as being especially effective for a particular race, when in fact there's no basis for that claim.

The old beliefs about race certainly persist among the non-scientist public.

Video sound: Dorothy Roberts: Thank you. [Applause.]

John Biewen: I watched a video on YouTube of you giving a talk at Vanderbilt.

Dorothy Roberts: Yes.

Biewen: And I wonder if you remember this, but the first question after your talk—I couldn't see the questioner, but he sounded male and white and young.

Roberts: [Laughs.] Okay.

Biewen: And he mansplained you. [Roberts laughs.] He stood up after hearing your entire lecture about race science, and he said:

Vanderbilt audio, young man: I think that science has proven over and over that there is a biological difference between races. And one great example is just that sickle cell anemia is much more prevalent in African Americans, or Africans, just because....

John Biewen: And he cited sickle cell anemia as proof.

Dorothy Roberts: Right, well, that's—I hope I answered him.

John Biewen: You did. You answered him at some length. [Roberts laughs.]

Video sound, Roberts: I respectfully disagree with everything you just said. [Laughs.] Okay, so, first of all...

Dorothy Roberts: The sickle cell example is the resort of people who know that there's a mountain of evidence showing that race is an invented category, and so they grasp at sickle cell all the time.

John Biewen: Yes, she says, sickle cell disease developed in only some human populations.

Dorothy Roberts: Peoples who live in areas where there's malaria have developed this mutation, or have a higher prevalence of this mutation, because it protects against malaria. But it's not confined to Africa, it's not present in all of Africa, and so it simply is not a "black" disease. It just says nothing about race whatsoever. It's linked to groups that developed in areas where there's a lot of malaria, that's all.

[Music]

John Biewen: I asked Dorothy Roberts why she thinks that young man at Vanderbilt, and so many of the rest of us, hold on so ferociously to our belief in race as a real thing, grounded in biology.

Dorothy Roberts: Because the belief in race is like a religion. It's like a religion that people, many people, find very hard to even imagine not existing. They resist even allowing their imaginations to go there because it's such an important part of their worldview and their sense of their own identities.

[Music]

John Biewen: So Chenjerai Kumanyika, remind people who you are.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well, I teach creative and cultural industries at Rutgers University. I'm a journalist and a podcast maker and a hip hop artist sometimes, and an advocate for social justice.

John Biewen: Yes, you are. You know, so, along the lines of what we have been hearing here, you know, there are lots of differences that people point to and that are, we're in the habit of thinking of as biological differences that fall along racial lines.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. Yeah.

John Biewen: One area is some health statistics, right? So, studies show black folk have higher rates of high blood pressure and heart disease than white folks and some other groups. For a long time, scientists assumed that was a genetic difference. And I did read the other day from Harvard Medical School that people descended from a certain, certain parts of Africa, equatorial Africa, may be more likely to have a gene that makes them sensitive to salt, leading to higher rates of hypertension. Again, that's a regional thing, it's not something you can generalize to all black folks. But now there's other research that's increasingly suggesting that a lot of these health differences come

about because of the stress of being a black person in the United States. Any thoughts on that?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well, the first thing I would want to say is, you know, what causes hypertension, high blood pressure, is complicated and has a lot of things involved. And it's also true, you know, a lot of white people and people of various ethnicities suffer from these diseases. I got to say that just because I know that there's like some "all lives matter" person out there that's like, "but what about the people who—"

John Biewen: Yes. So, "you're saying only black people have hypertension!" [Laughs.]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. Yeah. No, I'm not saying that. And also, I don't know exactly where I was descended from but I do know I probably need to slow down on the tortilla chips, too. [Biewen laughs.] That's definitely a real thing in my life. But you know what is also true is that, yes, being black in a capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal society can affect your health.

So I think one of the things we have to look at when we talk about this scientific myth of race, and the ideology of race, is how it functions politically, how the science functions politically. Because there's all kinds of things, economic conditions, conditions of life that people are in that affect their health, right? I mean, first of all, the enslavement, torture, and denial of life necessities for so much of American history to black folks produces what some people have called, like, a slave health deficit in early Colonial and Republican American history. And then, even well into the 20th century, you had people believing that African people across the world had these, all our health problems were hardwired into our biology.

So then when you believe that, it's much easier to deny access to health care for folks. And more recently, you don't get like the direct biological arguments being made as much. What you see now is the way that scientific beliefs about the biology of black

people is then linked to equally false and dangerous beliefs about the **culture** of African-Americans. One example of this was when scientific beliefs about syphilis were connected to ideas about morals and sexual habits of black folk.

John Biewen: Mm.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So, when you have politicians and corporations that are willing to use those cultural arguments, propped up by the rhetoric of science, it becomes much easier to continue to avoid researching and addressing all the economic and environmental and cultural conditions and environments that produce hypertension and stress and all these other health issues.

John Biewen: And this whole discussion, you know, again it takes us back to that chicken and egg, kind of cause-and-effect problem with racism that we've been talking about at several points in this series. Remember Ibram Kendi, the historian, his key insight from his history of racist ideas in America, that racist thinking isn't the **cause** of racist policies. It's the **result** of racist policies. It's the same thing here. Dorothy Roberts would say exactly the same thing in this context, that to the extent that people of color don't thrive in the same way on average as white people in this society—poverty and crime rates, the so-called achievement gap in school performance, black and brown kids have lower IQ scores than white kids on average. So people want to say, see, you know, people of color are inferior and that explains all of these all these disparities.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: And what Dorothy Roberts would say is, no. Those performance problems, if you want to call them that, are the result of 400 years of relentless racism in a society that advantages people called white and disadvantages people of color. And guess what, you know, how someone does on an IQ test correlates in a major way with income and educational opportunity. So, you know it's a, it's this vicious cycle—and it occurs to me that 'vicious' takes on special meaning in this case—

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh, yeah.

John Biewen: ...where you exploit and oppress people, then when they have struggles under that abuse, you point at them and say, "See, told you, you are inferior."

Chenjerai Kumanyika: What Dorothy Roberts is talking about, and what the genome project is talking about, that's science. But it's funny how people who are very proud of science suddenly don't like it when it's telling them things that they don't want to hear. So, I think there's a lot of reasons for this resistance to let go of race. And one reason is that societies like ours are built on great wealth disparity and you need an exploited class for that. In some ways that's what wealth is, like the history of wealth in the western world is inextricably linked to exploitation.

John Biewen: Extracting wealth from someone else's labor, right?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right, yeah. And so, when you produce that exploited class and that labor using the concept of race, you also produce a whole social order that lasts for a long time based on race. And what that means for us right now is there's a lot of people who didn't consciously participate in that order who have an investment in it, and they have an investment in whiteness. George Lipsett calls it a **possessive** investment in whiteness. And you can see it in the stakes involved in people's neighborhoods and their schools. Who gets to be management, who gets to, you know, whose history and culture get taught, whose mascots, you know, all these kinds of things, right? And you see people are really invested in that like they don't want to let go, right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And even when presented with science and a lot of reasons why they, why they should.

But I also think there's another reason that we hold on to racial ideas and, you know, we're talking about whiteness in this podcast. But this comes most clear to me when I think about blackness, actually, right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, I identify a lot of ways, based on political causes I'm involved with. But one of the ways I identify is black, and you know I'm proud of my blackness because African people who were grouped together under blackness have survived and resisted. And the cultures—and that's definitely plural—of African people have given us so much of the science and innovation and creativity that structures the world.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah but I have to be honest. I'm proud of blackness but I've come to see it less as my, you know, an identity, and more as, like, a technology.

John Biewen: Meaning?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, it's kind of a weird word, but I see it as a technology because I see blackness as not something that is hardwired into our biology, that just determines who we are. Instead it's something that we use. And I have to think about it like that because I have to recognize the way that it can also be used against us. And when it's being used against us, I cast a skeptical and pessimistic eye toward it. Right? But, you know, I'm trying to be sensitive to like where blackness, where the technology of blackness fails. You use that technology and it doesn't tell you what you need to know about a group of people, or a person. But also to navigate in this white supremacist country, and to live with a sense of political clarity and joy and possibility, I also tap into that other side of blackness I was talking earlier. And I'm optimistic about,

you know, tapping into those resources. So.

John Biewen: So, since you brought up blackness, and black folks' attachment to their blackness—which is not the same, is it, as white folks' attachment to whiteness.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [Laughs.] Naw.

John Biewen: Right? It's not like—that's another whole discussion....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's not just a mirror image, there, or a flipside.

John Biewen: Exactly. There's, there's a definite, there's a skewed relationship there, it's a very different sort of relationship. But since you brought it up, I want to, let me pitch this in here. And I put the question to Nell Irvin Painter, the wonderful historian who we've relied on so much in this series, the question, why haven't the genome project's findings taken hold in the culture? And listen to what she said about that:

Nell Irvin Painter: Because of these deep running currents in the way we conceptualize American society, we need race. And it's not just white people who need race. Non-white people need race too, because that's part of how we think about ourselves. We need race. There's only so much usefulness of 'We're all the same,' when you go through life, when you need to face other issues, like the election of 2016 which was very much about race.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: What Dr. painter is talking about is the puzzle, right? It's, we've got to accept that race isn't real. It's remarkably durable as an institution, you know, but then it's unstable as a concept. Right? So, when I go to Haiti, and I'm like really dark skinned for people who haven't seen me. When I go to Haiti. guess what they call me? A *blanc*. You know, at least at least until I get cool people and can persuade them not to call me that anymore. [Biewen laughs.] But when I hop off the plane, "He's a *blanc*."

John Biewen: Wow.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You know, he doesn't speak Haitian Creole... Et cetera, right?

John Biewen: They can tell you're American? Is that the basis of it?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. Yeah. It's a lot of things that they can identify me about, and those things come together in a concept a *blanc*, of white, whiteness. You know, as a way to describe it. So you know, I mean, when I first heard that, that was like somebody stabbed me. I was like oh, a *blanc*, really? I'm here, you know, I'm in Haiti, I'm in the place where, you know, the enslaved people overthrew the situation!

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But I had to recognize the truth in that. Like, if I think that my experience is the same as someone in Haiti, it's not. And one word, you know, I understand why they put that word "blanc" on there, or I'm not living in reality. I mean, so it's unstable. I wish, sometimes I wish that race was linked biologically to dancing, because you know, but I think the truth is that if I want to improve my salsa skills I got a lot of practice ahead of me. You know? A **lot** of practice.

John Biewen: [Laughs.] You didn't receive that particular gift?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Nah. Nah. I'm not gifted with that. So, we got to get our minds around that, and like there's a psychological element to wrapping our brains around it, because in this society it's counterintuitive. But I think also we have to organize our advocacy work and our political work and our economic work around people that are the most vulnerable. And race is one way, not the only way, but one very important way to do that. Right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Because it can help you, this concept of race can help you identify and predict patterns of the things going on right now. Political redistricting and voting laws and health care, schools, curriculum, all these things. And like right now for example in Florida, you know, people are going to be voting on things that have to do with ex-felons' right to vote after they've served time, and things like that. Right? And so in a way you have to understand race to understand some things about that.

John Biewen: I just saw online a news story from *The New York Daily News* that said 99 percent of students handcuffed by the NYPD in public schools in 2016 were Black or Hispanic.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: So, we wouldn't have that report if we didn't have a notion of race, and we wouldn't know about such a wild disparity like that. Right? So...

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right. And it might point the way for you to address that problem, you know, or at least some important part of it. So you, in that way you kind of are linked to it. You need to, you know, we're sort of bound to race to solve some of these things, that were produced by a world organized according to race or at least to a country organized that way.

You know, one other thing I wanted to say is, you know, because this episode has been about science. And it really has produced kind of a conundrum for me that I've been living with since I first kind of became aware of some of this information. And the problem is, you know, when I was young I believed all kind of craziness. Right? Like I didn't, I was not a scientific person when I was younger, I didn't have a scientific mind. But as I've gotten older, especially in this sort of post-fact world we live in right now, I've really come to appreciate the value of science, the value of methodology. But that

brings me to this conundrum where I'm like, man, you know, leading scientists throughout huge parts of western history, including now, have really got it wrong.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So if you were relying on science, you were getting it wrong, because you were into skulls and basically scientific versions of white supremacy. Tuskegee experiments and all kinds of craziness.

But you know, and I'm really not sure the way out of that, but one thing I've come to is that it seems to me that a lot of those scientists were asking the wrong questions. Because science inevitably is being deployed in some kind of political arrangement.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And in this case, as you and Dorothy Roberts were talking about, there was various projects of Western empire and colonialism, where slavery etc. were in a sense guiding the science. Right?

John Biewen: Yeah. Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So that made the science have the wrong questions. And when you ask the wrong questions you're bound to get the wrong answers, right? So if you're not asking questions about how to, you know, produce more justice in the world... Questions—our science is like about weapons, and capital, and you know those kinds of things, and not about how to heal and to create equality and you know those kinds of things. So you know, maybe that's—I don't want to discard science at all, but I want to say that maybe we need to look at what forces are directing the kinds of questions our scientists are asking.

[Music]

John Biewen: There's more to come in this series, a lot more. Next time, a racial cleansing in America, just about a century ago, on the edge of Appalachia. There were lots of racial expulsions in the United States, though most aren't talked about much. More on whiteness and willful forgetting.

The editor of this series is Loretta Williams. Music this time by Blue Dot Sessions, Kevin MacCleod, Lee Rosevere, and Sumtimes Why.

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