

Scene on Radio
My White Friends (Seeing White, Part 12) Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-42-my-white-friends-seeing-white-part-12/>

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Chenjerai Kumanyika: Sometimes it's like, I notice when you're talking to white people and you say the word 'white,' it's almost like you just stabbed 'em a little bit. [Biewen laughs.] I mean, but you don't have to be saying something crazy, like you could just be saying, "A white person ate his cereal." It's like, "A white person hugged his mother." Each time it's like you see them, you know, kind of...

John Biewen: Flinch.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: ...flinch a little bit. You know, like, what is that?

John Biewen: Yeah I just flinched, twice. When you said that word.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [Laughs.] Sorry. I'm sorry.

[Music]

John Biewen: Chenjerai Kumanyika, from one of our first conversations in this project. I'm John Biewen, it's *Scene on Radio*, part twelve of our series, *Seeing White*, looking at whiteness—its history, what it means, and how it works in the world. White folks may feel we're being stabbed a little bit when our whiteness is mentioned because, for the most part, we get to go through life imagining that race is something other people have.

Deena Hayes-Green, REI workshop: There's another term in marketing and advertising, called markedness: m-a-r-k-e-d-n-e-s-s. Markedness says, that which is marked is different. That which is unmarked is normal.

John Biewen: Deena Hayes-Greene of the [Racial Equity Institute](#), at that antiracism workshop we've listened in on several times. I recorded Deena and her colleagues presenting to a diverse roomful of professionals in Charlotte.

Deena Hayes-Green: That which is unmarked is normal, that which is marked is different. Do you have historically Black churches here in Charlotte? Are they celebrated as historically Black churches, are they articulated and written about as historically Black churches? Do we have historically *white* churches?

Woman in distance: No.

Deena Hayes-Green: Well, you do. [Laughing.] The only reason you have historically Black churches is because of historically white churches. Are they articulated as historically white churches?

Man: Nope.

Deena Hayes-Green: Is there any marquee, any celebration, any articles written about historically white churches and their history? It's the norm. What did we call the educational system prior to Brown? We had Negro schools and ... and schools. Marked and unmarked.

John Biewen: Likewise, the way we often talk about *people* here in the U.S. You may be Latino or African American, Asian or Native American. Or you're just an American. A woman, a guy.

Since part one of the *Seeing White* series, we've talked about turning the lens. Instead of the usual practice of looking at race through the experience of people of color, we would direct our gaze at white people and the white so-called race. We meant the lens

metaphorically. But in this episode, an African American photographer who turned the lens literally.

Myra Greene: I had just, or I was just finishing a project called Character Recognition – and those are self-portraits on black glass, ambrotypes, and....

John Biewen: Myra Greene's art photography has been exhibited from San Francisco to New York, and collected by the National Gallery in DC. She's 41. She's an Associate Professor of Art and Visual Culture at Spelman College in Atlanta. One day about ten years ago in Rochester, New York, where Myra was living at the time...

Myra Greene: I was at a very dear friend's house, Kris and Dan, and we were just talking about the plates and how they functioned, and...

John Biewen: Myra had made the photos she was showing her friends using an 1850s process.

Myra Greene: You're transported into another time. They do not look like modern photographs. They're printed on glass. And so the first time I made one I pulled it up and I was like, oh my god, I look like a slave.

John Biewen: Myra's ambrotypes are super-close-ups. Just portions of her face. So close you can see her pores, the light reflecting off her dark skin.

Myra Greene: And sort of looking at my lips, looking at the shape of my nose, sort of those known aspects as to how you describe race. You know, like the thickness, the broadness. Sort of recording my Blackness.

John Biewen: So, back to that story in Rochester. Myra's friend Dan, who is white, looked at the photos and said simply that they were beautiful.

Myra Greene: And I said, well, how do you consider, like, do you think about Blackness? Because that was the main crux of that project, sort of thinking about images of my face, how people respond to just sort of looking at my face. And he said, “Well, they’re beautiful, but I don’t think about Blackness.” He was like, “I try not to think about race.” And I said well, Dan, that doesn’t make any sense. He was like, “Well, you know, mahhh...” And he was kind of edgy and uncomfortable. And I said, well, I think about race every day. I have to. And I go, do you not think about whiteness? And he was like, “No, no, I don’t think about whiteness.” And I was like, but that’s such an important part of your identity. He’s like, Aahhh. [Laughing.] I was like, okay. And I kind of knew that that was the next project. Having photographed myself for so many years, sort of thinking about my existence, my identity, how I’m portrayed, how I portray myself. So, I just sort of said, okay, well, what happens if I try to photograph whiteness?

[Music]

Myra Greene: Dan became the first person I photographed and he’s the image of a man sitting on a cement block, barbecuing ...

John Biewen: In the photo, Dan is wearing cargo shorts and flip-flops. He’s blond and pale. He’s sitting in his driveway on a lawn chair, next to a Weber grill. In the background there’s grass and trees and a clear sky.

Myra Greene: And the funny thing is that that’s sort of what we did over the summer, is we’d go and sit on their parking slab [laughing] and barbecue in the backyard. The picture comes from real life but is also like a strange performance. Like, play we’re gonna barbecue, but before everyone comes over, we’re gonna stage this photograph. Because I really love the colors, the blue and the green is so warm, and then the white picket fence is in the background. It sort of illuminated whiteness in a very strange way.

[Music]

Myra Greene: Then I started like asking people, “Can I photograph you? Why? Because you’re white. Okay.” And it sort of began—not really knowing where it was going, but going somewhere.

John Biewen: Before we meet a few of the white friends Myra photographed, let’s pause to get an answer to this question, one of the most common questions she got about the project, she says.

Myra Greene: [Laughs] Okay, so why do I have so many white friends. [Laughs] By Myra Greene. Um...

John Biewen: Of course, most people of color living in the United States get to know white people, like it or not. That’s certainly going to happen if you choose white-dominated professions like photography and academia. (The reverse, white folks having lots of relationships with people of color, is more optional and much less common, as we know.) Still, a POC who goes to school or works with white folks may or may not choose to hang out with them, often involuntarily. May or may not have deep, lasting friendships with white people. Myra does.

Myra Greene: I grew up in Harlem, New York. And my sister was the smart one and got into a very lovely, privileged school on the Upper East Side and my mother said, you will take them both [laughs], I being the younger one.

John Biewen: Myra spent eleven years at that school. She then went to a mostly-white liberal arts college, Washington University in St. Louis.

Myra Greene: So I made friends with my floor-mates and I made friends with the guys downstairs, and...

John Biewen: She got her masters in Photography in New Mexico...

Myra: I was told I was the second Black student to come through the program.

John Biewen: Myra does have Black friends, too. But she says she's never avoided a situation simply because most of the people in it would be white.

Myra: I'm going to start with an open heart and trust you and think you're okay, but if you have two or three racially insensitive moments, I'm going to walk away. And that's okay. But I'd rather start from an open place than to shut everyone out. And I think that that's probably how I've lived my life and how I've acquired a bundle of white friends, because they were the cool ones that didn't have poor racial tendencies or thought bigger and broader and expansively about life.

John Biewen: It seems her friends are also the sort of white people who would say, "Oh, your next project is about white people and you want to photograph me? I'm in."

The collection of about 50 images became a traveling exhibition and a book, *My White Friends*, published in 2013.

Doni Nicholas: Well, my name is Doni Nicholas. So Myra and I had a really chance encounter. We met through a mutual friend out on a porch at a birthday party, playing Rummikub. And we have been friends ever since, going on nine years now. We moved to Chicago right about the same time, so that's how we met.

Myra Greene: I just knew I could always photograph her, but I couldn't find the picture, like just sort of in our lived lives. And one day she was describing her life in Utah, and she asked me if I wanted to go golfing and I was like, are you crazy? I don't do that. [Laughs.] And so I go, "You have your golf bag here from Utah?" She goes, "Oh yeah." I was like, okay, there's a photograph in there somewhere.

Doni Nicholas: I was game for it. I understood the background of it, I understood why she was doing it. Especially when she explained to me the golf outfit, it totally made sense.

John Biewen: So, the photo. Doni with her long blond hair and sunglasses, in a green pastel polo shirt and plaid skirt.

Myra Greene: Doni is a tall, voluptuous woman standing with a practice, golf—what do you call it? Golf...

John Biewen: She's at a driving range, right?

Myra Greene: Yes, she's at a driving range, a golf driving range, sort of leaning on a—this is how badly I do not know golf, I can't even think of any of the terms.

John Biewen: She's leaning on a club, one of her irons.

Myra Greene: On a golf club, sort of with her decorative golf bag to the side which has a—it's pink, with a Pink Panther head somehow involved with it. It's pretty amusing.

Doni Nicholas: I understood that golfing and all the elements of that photo just screamed whiteness, but I never really thought about it until she took that photo.

[Music]

Matt Geesaman: My name is Matt Geesaman, I'm a public school teacher in Chicago, at a small school on the West Side called Al Raby High School.

Myra Greene: Matt's nickname is Goose, so I will probably call him Goose for the rest of this. He's standing in front of an older, used Subaru, a straight on photograph, hips and above, staring vacantly into the camera.

Matt Geesaman: The idea is me after a day of work, so I'm pretty much like standing in front of my car on the block that I live on. I'm dressed in a shirt and tie, which is what I wear pretty much every day. I have like my work bag on one shoulder. I'm apparently very intensely clutching my keys in my other hand. You can tell I'm fairly uncomfortable because I'm standing straight up, kind of ramrod straight posture as I'm sitting there. If you look at it as a quick glance, it's just a white guy standing in front of his car.

John Biewen: [Laughs.] And what do you look like?

Matt Geesaman: I think the students' best description, and one of the benefits or drawbacks of working in a school with lots of adolescents is they will tell you exactly who you look like. And the students' best [approximation] is that I look like a combination of Macaulay Culkin and Hitler. Which is a bit much. But I do have the Macaulay Culkin face, and the hair has been, it's been told to me that it has some similarities—I wouldn't say it's Hitler-esque but it might be Hitler-*ish*, a little bit. [Biewen laughs.]

John Biewen: Myra admits Goose's haircut was a feature that interested her, *My White Friends*-wise.

Myra Greene: I'm trying to avoid saying it, because I would be totally killed. [Laughs.] But yes, that—he's an incredibly nice person. We do not judge people based on the flow of their hair.

John Biewen: If it's starting to sound like Myra set out to make caricatures of the whitest people and situations she could find, that's not it, she says. In fact, in the case of Matt Geesaman, she says most of what interests her about him and his whiteness is not visible in the photograph. He teaches social studies and U.S. history in that Chicago public school.

Myra Greene: I think a lot about Matt in that occupation and his whiteness in that occupation. You know, he teaches on the West Side of Chicago, predominantly Black schools, in which he could easily, like a bad Eighties movie, he could easily be ignored, but often times is able to re-situate and reposition history or tries to reposition history and ethics so that students engage. I find that really interesting.

John Biewen: In other words, Matt's whiteness is front and center every day in his job, in a high school where virtually all of the students are Black and, he says, the teachers are about half and half, Black and white.

Matt Geesaman: Yeah, I think you get that sense that a lot of times when my students interact with white people, they're figures of authority, and a teacher is no different than any other aspect of authority they've seen, so there's an iciness at the beginning. But it's easy to break down, just in the common practice of just getting to know people and getting to know anyone. And when you teach about history, like, you have to confront race immediately. It's too woven into what we talk about and what we do in my class. So I think it's something you have to open about. And there's never a time where I'm not open about the fact that I'm very white, and there's never a time when we don't have to recognize the fact that the school is almost 99 per cent, it's 100 percent Black, and that's something that we have to address. Like, how did we get to this point?

And yeah, sometimes there's kind of a CPS [Chicago Public Schools] rite of passage, that you haven't really made it until the students like say that, oh, no no, he's not really white, he's just very light skinned. And that's kind of a measure of acceptance among the students that multiple teachers have reported.

[Music]

Myra Greene: There she is. [Sound: turning page.] That's Erica. Erica is another person who, she's actually one of my college friends.

Erica Gaswirth: My name is Erica Gaswirth. I live in New York and I am an architect. Myra and I became very close when we were in school together and then after school we've kept in touch. We've never lived in the same city since we graduated but we always manage to visit one another a couple of times a year.

John Biewen: If Myra's photo of Doni Nicholas at the driving range screams whiteness, and if Matt Geesaman looks like an earnest, kind of stiff white guy who could be cast as a Nazi in a movie, in Erica's image, it seems to me, at least, whiteness is more muted.

Erica Gaswirth: I am sitting at my dining room table from my old apartment in Brooklyn, and the steam radiator is behind me. It was an old building built in like the 1890s so it has that intricate detail and just sort of the radiator, and the high chair for my son I think is sitting next to me. But my child is not in the photograph so it is an empty high chair.

Myra Greene: I knew from the beginning, or I knew once I developed the title *My White Friends*, that it would sit in between these—it would have to be mundane hints to stereotype and then pull back off of that completely. Because if you stay in stereotype, it becomes completely false, right?

John Biewen: Myra talks about the *White Friends* project not as a statement—here's what white people look like, or whatever—but as a question, an invitation to a conversation. What *is* "white" about this person or her environment? And does that question raise other questions, about how we look at images of people who aren't white?

Myra Greene: If I took Erica out and put a Black body in, would it change the read of the picture? It's this complicated scenario of race being a part of the description but not always primary. It's embedded in there, but it's not maybe the first or second thing. With Erica's picture, I think motherhood ironically becomes primary. And then a sense of descriptions of beauty becomes secondary. And involved and mixed up all into that is this sense of whiteness.

John Biewen: Another thing complicating Erica's whiteness, for Erica herself, is that she's Jewish. Myra's invitation to be photographed as a white person led to a conversation about that between the two friends. Here's Erica.

Erica Gaswirth: Jewish is always something that is the other, and so it's something that I guess is more specialized in an identity or part of a smaller group, so that's always something I've always just related to more than just sort of being white, which is I guess a broader group. And I have more in common with other Jewish people than I do with other white people.

John Biewen: That doesn't mean Erica had any problem being a part of the *My White Friends* project. She understood that Myra has long been exploring racial identity and how it gets visually presented, and seen.

Erica Gaswirth: It was interesting that she was looking at it from the opposite side of the mirror, I guess, but it seemed like just the next step in the progression and the work that she had always been exploring in her work.

John Biewen: So you got it.

Erica Gaswirth: Yes.

John Biewen: Here's the thing about Myra's project. Compared to what you might typically see in a gallery or a photo book, at first glance, these pictures look strikingly banal. Almost like family snapshots of ordinary people. (That is, ordinary white people.) A middle-aged guy on his motorcycle. A young brown-haired woman standing in a snowy field. A couple on a dock at the edge of a lake. But Myra put them together under the title *My White Friends*, and yes, she says, she got more negative reaction to the project than to anything she'd done before. Including the charge that the project was racist.

Myra Greene: Yeah, I did, but I would say in a more anonymous way [chuckles], in a more troll-y internet way.

John Biewen: Another common response, she says, from white people, was to shrug and dismiss the project instead of engaging with the questions she was trying to ask.

Myra Greene: So contextually, I think when the project came out, some people thought it was charming or cute. *The New York Times* did a Lens blog about it and those responses were hysterical because, again, there were assumed narratives with every part of it, like, If I had done this with my Black friends, it wouldn't have been anything special. And it's like well, okay, do you understand the social context of photographic history? Not sure if you do.

John Biewen: Meaning?

Myra: Meaning that like, how, the context of power—who controls what parts of the image.

John Biewen: Right. And that there's been a whole lot more white folks photographing Black folks than the other way around.

Myra Greene: Exactly. Exactly. And, but then when the roles are reversed, what happens when you're not in control of your own story?

[Music]

John Biewen: Doni Nicholas reflected on that experience. She's the woman Myra photographed with her golf clubs.

Doni Nicholas: When I think about somebody defining me based solely on that photo, you know and there's a lot of things you can take away from that, obviously. But all of those things are so far down on the list of what defines me as me, defines me as white, defines me as female, defines me as human. So, I guess I feel a little bit caged by that, does that make sense? In that I'm now putting out there, this is me, but you have to pick out of that photo what makes me, me. Yeah. So it's an interesting study in that whiteness.

[Music]

Myra Greene: What did I learn? I think—in graduate school, I had a wonderful professor, Patrick Nagatani, Japanese-American, and he always said, “Be careful of how you read people because their experiences may have been way more expansive than you think.” Right? And sort of like, I think I've learned a lot about stereotypes, and how they function and how they don't, how we live up to them and how they fail us. I think I've learned a lot about how photographs are a lot of stereotypes. And just sort of like, how quickly we ask visual culture to confirm what we know already. And when do we step back and challenge that? I've learned a lot about that.

[Music]

John Biewen: What's up, Chenjerai?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: What's up, John. How are you doing, man?

John Biewen: I'm doing pretty well. You?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm just out here taking pictures of white people, you know, because they're white.

John Biewen: Well, I hope you didn't walk up and tell them that's why you were doing it. If they're strangers, but....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I don't know what is more creepy, to not tell them [laughs] or to tell them?

John Biewen: [Laughs] It's a fair point. It's a fair point. Chenjerai Kumanyika, collaborating conversationalist on this project. Media scholar at Rutgers, activist, artist, journalist, podcaster.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Maker of zucchini bread.

John Biewen: [Laughs.]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I do, I like zucchini bread. I mean, you know.

John Biewen: Is that a white thing?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, I was going to say. Speaking of whiteness. Yeah, I don't know.

John Biewen: Well and it occurs to me that this, this episode and what we've heard about Myra Green's project, does give us a chance to come at whiteness from a somewhat different angle than we have been up to now in the project.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. I thought Myra's photos and just the way she talked about that project was really just a fascinating discussion. And it is a little different than how we've been talking about it. We've really been looking at whiteness as, I talk about whiteness as technology, as, you know, a power system, and this is a different way to think about think about it, even if some of those same things are still in play. Because I mean, at the surface level, you look at the images, and to me, it pulls me into another

kind of conversation people have that I would describe as just kind of like, whiteness as culture, right? Like as—golf. Like that. Do you play frisbee, actually? Do you play ultimate frisbee, not just throwing around a frisbee. Have you played a game of ultimate frisbee?

John Biewen: Well, I think I have, once. And my son got me playing frisbee golf a few times.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Ooh, that's a thing? Frisbee golf?

John Biewen: So now you're combining frisbee and golf.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [Laughs.]

John Biewen: I mean, how much whiter can you get than that?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Uh....

John Biewen: Yeah, there's a frisbee golf course near my place that my teenage son has actually taken me to a few times.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh, there's a frisbee golf *course*!

John Biewen: Yes.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh man.

John Biewen: It's free, though! It's in a park public park, you know, so it doesn't have that exclusive thing going that real golf has. In case that makes it a little bit less white.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [Laughing.] We still have public parks? I need to call Trump. We need to get rid of that, man. You know, that's, we can make money off that. But I think there's an image of like beach volleyball in the pictures, and the person in the, I don't know if the guy is hiking but he's kind of like in the woods, in the snow?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: These are things that are kind of like, you know, they're on Christian Lander's list of *Stuff White People Like*, you know.

John Biewen: Along with, what, Taylor Swift?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Taylor Swift. Yeah. But you know what? These people, they seem like they might like somebody like Wilco more than Taylor Swift.

John Biewen: [Laughs.] Yeah. I think you're right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Do you like Wilco?

John Biewen: I used to like Wilco. I like Son Volt better.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Mmm. I got persuaded to listen to, like, some folks convinced me for a while that I liked Wilco. Maybe I still do, I don't know.

John Biewen: I liked early Wilco. That's a classic thing to say.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, right. Then they changed.

John Biewen: So, Professor Kumanyika, here's a question. Why is it, explain to us why it's not racist for people of color to sit around and have a chuckle about stuff that white people like, or ways that white people are culturally, when it would be, you know, if the

roles were reversed.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Riiight. Like if we were having this conversation about Black people, that wouldn't be cool.

John Biewen: Right. And there are people out there saying, hey, come on. If it's racist if I do that about Black people or whatever, Native Americans or somebody....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, that question. I mean, well, let me just say, at this point, let me just say, I got mad respect for our listeners. It's like, if you've been listening to this series and you still think racism is about individual people identifying things about people, you know, based on skin color, and that's what racism is all about, and everything's even-steven, it's like you probably should listen again to our podcast. And probably you should listen slower—I don't know what it means to listen slower, but....

John Biewen: [Laughs.] Put your podcast app on half speed.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. It's just, I mean, but okay, sure. Myra talked about stereotypes and where stereotypes fail us, and I think pointing at an individual white person and making assumptions about what their life has been, what their struggle has or hasn't been, in my personal experience, in Chenjerai's experience, that doesn't wind up being a good predictor. You never know. People surprise you all the time. I mean, and even in terms of the stereotypes, I mean we talked about golf, right? But the PGA list has Tiger Woods as the second-best golf player of all time, and you know he's won 14 majors, and 79 [tournaments]. So there's a danger of essentialism there with the kind of joking that we're doing if it gets taken too seriously.

But on the other hand, there are some things that I think, there are some things you can know because a person is white. Like, for example, I know that you, John, can turn on the television and see people that look like you widely represented, more widely represented than me. I know that you probably don't have to educate your children to be

aware of systemic racism in order for their physical protection—like you'll teach them that but you don't have to for them to be physically safe in the world.

John Biewen: That's right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I know that you can do well in a challenging situation and not be, it won't be seen as like a credit to your race. You could curse, or dress in any kind of way you wanted, or not answer an e-mail, or be late, and it's not going to be like this is, you're reflecting on white people. If a cop pulls you over, you know that whatever it was, it wasn't because you were white that you got pulled over.

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And so, and by the way I'm borrowing all these things from Peggy McIntosh's list of, the [Invisible Knapsack of Privilege](#). But I mean like those are things that are—do you think I'm right? Am I predicting accurately on those things?

John Biewen: Oh, absolutely, yes. I agree. So, exactly. Your point is that those things are, those are fair predictions to make about a white person and their experience they're going to have in the world. As opposed to anything else, you know, about, oh—it's certainly not the case that all white people have money, or that all white people just about anything, right?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. Right.

John Biewen: There's not a lot that you can say. But those are some things you can say.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Those are some things you can say. And I mean, I think also in terms of, looking at like why isn't it racist. I mean, the thing is, you and I could talk about golf and we could talk about all those kinds of things. But none of those, that

conversation we have is not going to change like the wealth distribution that affects millions of people. It's not going to affect who gets stopped or frisked or shot by police or who's likely to get a job. You know, those things affect millions of people. Who's likely to get a loan for a house or get hired at like a tech firm. And we know that those things are kind of organized by race. So in that context, us having this conversation, it's not the same as these other ideas about people of color, because those ideas are actually part of the structure that makes that, that affects that list of things I just talked about, you know.

John Biewen: Right. And they exist, were designed, really, in order to justify a system and a structure that's unequal and exploitive. So they're much more loaded from that standpoint.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. It's a different kind of conversation. Again, I'm not, I think it's—there's a moral question, like, is it wrong to judge people and all that kind of stuff. But then there's also an accuracy question. For me, the accuracy one is the more important one. I'm like, you just, you can't look at a white person and think they didn't have a struggle. In this world everybody struggles in some way. Come on.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But you know, and yet, there's these larger patterns that we've been talking about.

John Biewen: And really what you're doing there, Chenjerai, is you're sort of bringing the conversation back to the way that we've been talking about it throughout this series, as opposed to the kind of, you know, making some cultural observations about white people are this way or that way—back to that discussion of power dynamics and who has rights and resources, and equality and that kind of thing. And do you think there is, there is some usefulness in a project like the one Myra Greene did in that regard, you

know, that it's not just a kind of superficial observation about what is in white folks' environment or about how white folks look, that somehow....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Or haircuts or something, you know.

John Biewen: Yeah, exactly.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, I mean, what I think is cool about the way that Myra talks about her work is, she said it's an invitation. You look at those pictures and it's an invitation to say, what about this photo is white or suggests whiteness? And I think that is, I really like that way of thinking about it, because it pushes us to some of these deeper layers. I think there's a, there is a danger that you'll just think of it about like it's about haircuts or, you know, whether you like the Allman Brothers or something like that. Or Mike Birbiglia. I like Mike Birbiglia quite a bit, I just want to say, you know.

John Biewen: [Laughs.]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But I think that, I don't really think of those kind of cultural things as the primary problem of whiteness. That's not the main thing that we are trying to understand and work on whiteness. We shouldn't necessarily be that worried about those things. But there is one, there is a cultural thing that I think goes a little deeper and that's more—I don't really know how to describe it but it's there's a culture of silence. Something about the dominant American culture where we're supposed to be silent about certain kinds of things. And also, you know, there's just like an entitlement, you know, that would be another thing I would bring up, like there's like a way that sometimes white folks just feel like they can come up and just tell you things. And take up a lot of space. Even white folks sometimes in social justice spaces. I mean, this is a problem. People talk about this all time.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So I don't know how to put language on that, but you know what I'm talking about?

John Biewen: Yeah, well, and the one word you used, silence. I think, it sounds like what you're getting at is that, in conjunction, or another layer along with this kind of structural system of white supremacy, there's a cultural layer in which it's expected, it's part of our culture as white people, to not want to rock that boat too hard.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Uh-hmm.

John Biewen: To not take too radical a position. And this is maybe the issue about, you know, sort of liberal folks sort of holding the right kind of sympathetic attitudes towards people of color and about social justice and so on but not really ultimately doing all that much to change it. Because that might entail actually really giving up some power. And some of the advantages that come, that come with whiteness. Is that kind of what you're getting when you talk about, so that that becomes, it takes on a cultural, there's a cultural aspect to that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. Exactly. I mean, I think that's it. What I'm trying to say is that the things I'm mostly worried about with whiteness are, I would call them structural, meaning that they have to do it with legislation and the way institutions function and all those kinds of things. But those things do connect to this, they do produce a certain way of being in the world. And by the way, like, we're painting with a really broad brush here now, right?

John Biewen: Yes.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: For the purpose of offering a lens to understand some stuff. This doesn't, you know, I hope people get that I don't think this applies down to like every individual or something like that, nowhere near. But it's just something that, when I look at Myra's photos and think about it, I mean, I try to push through to that deeper

level and say, what kind of society—if we take this collection of pictures and images, what is the organization of this society where you have a white person and golf. And somebody has a pool, and it looks like they own the pool, and it's a white person. And all the spaces that they're in, I don't know what their economic status is but they look different than what it looks like in North Philly. The places look like they have a certain kind of safety to them. And so, and in a way, the people, based on the images I've grown up with all my life, they match those images, they match that. It's not to say you couldn't find some African-Americans and Latinos and you know Native Americans and Asian folks who are in those communities, but those aren't the dominant images I associate—I associate those kind of people with those kind of spaces, and I associate those kind of spaces with those kinds of people, based on what I've been taught. And why is that? Why is that the image that we have, and what does that mean? And how are we a part of that. You know, what role, how are we situated in that? You and I.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And what is our role in undoing that? That arrangement.

John Biewen: Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika. With this episode, you really probably want to go to our website, SceneonRadio.org, and look for the links to Myra Greene's [My White Friends](#) photos, to see Doni and Goose and Erica and the others, as well as Myra's other work. There's also a link to [a talk, with images](#), that she did here at the Center for Documentary Studies.

Next episode, more *Seeing White*. We're not done yet. The larger truth about government handouts and who has really gotten most of them. Can you guess?

The editor on the project is Loretta Williams. Music in this episode by Blue Dot Sessions, Lee Rosevere, and Sumtimes Why. I'm on Twitter, [@Sceneonradio](#). Like the [Scene on Radio Facebook page](#). Send us your thoughts. And give us a rating and

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