

TRANSCRIPT
HOW WE GOT HERE
EP 2 – Whiteness

SAM FREEDMAN: [TAPE] GEORGE BAILEY AND MARY HATCH: Buffalo girls, won't you come out tonight, come out tonight, come out tonight

I'll bet a lot of you recognize that song. It's from the film "It's A Wonderful Life."

[TAPE] [singing off key] Buffalo girls, won't you come out tonight, and dance by the light of the moon.

BAILEY: Hot dog.

One of those films that people watch over and over again, especially at Christmastime. One of those films that always charts high on lists of the greatest American movies.

Jimmy Stewart plays this idealistic small-town banker named George Bailey, a real friend to the little guy.

[TAPE] GEORGE BAILEY: Now Mrs. Thompson how much do you want?

MRS. THOMPSON: But it's your own money, George.

BAILEY: Now don't mind about that. How much do you want?

Long story short, he saves his hometown of Bedford Falls from falling into the grip of Henry Potter, a much bigger banker with a heart of sawdust.

[TAPE] HENRY POTTER: What are you but a warped, frustrated, young man. A miserable little clerk crawling in here on your hands and knees and begging for help. [Potter laughs] You're worth more dead than alive.

So, sure: good triumphs, evil is defeated, roll the closing credits. But let me tell you about another aspect of "It's A Wonderful Life," one you probably never contemplated.

Bedford Falls is a very, very white place. I think the only Black person in the movie is George Bailey's housekeeper. She's portrayed with stereotypical sass —

[TAPE] HARRY BAILEY: Annie, my sweet, have you got those pies?

ANNIE: If you lay a hand on me I'll hit you with this broom.

...which is a subject for another day entirely. The Martinis, they're the racial minority in the movie. They are Italian. Their skin is notably darker than everybody else's. They run a bar and restaurant on the outskirts of town; we see George Bailey get really tanked there in one scene. The father, Giuseppe, speaks with a thick immigrant accent. And then, in one of the key moments of

the film, George Bailey loans Martini the money to get out of a tenement and buy his very first home – in a brand-new suburban subdivision.

[TAPE] [EXTRA](#): Martini! You rented a new house?
[GIUSEPPE MARTINI](#): Rent? [laughing] You hear what he say, Mr. Bailey?
[GEORGE BAILEY](#): What's that?
[MARTINI](#): I own the house! Me, Giuseppe Martini, I own my own house. No more we live like pigs in this Potter's Field. Mary, Mary.

We see Martini pile all of this decrepit furniture into his rickety old truck, then his wife and all his kids and even the family goat cram into Bailey's car for the drive to paradise. What the film shows – is the process of Giuseppe Martini and family becoming white. In fact, that scene is whiteness studies in a nutshell. There's actually an academic discipline called whiteness studies. I'm Sam Freedman. I'm a professor at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.

This is [How We Got Here](#), a podcast that takes a step back to look at the pressing issues facing journalists today--race, class, immigration, gender. As journalists, we like to say we're writing the first draft of history. But if we don't know our own history, we run the risk of misinterpreting what we see. And what we hear. Of not being able to connect the dots. George Floyd's murder...

[TAPE] [MINNEAPOLIS CROWD](#): George Floyd!
[PROTESTER](#): Now say his name!
[MINNEAPOLIS CROWD](#): George Floyd!
[PROTESTER](#): Now say his name!

...the Black Lives Matter movement...

[TAPE] [PORTLAND CROWD](#): Black Lives Matter!
[PROTESTER](#): Who's lives matter?
[PORTLAND CROWD](#): Black Lives Matter!
[PROTESTER](#): Who's lives matter?

... the election, the attempted coup...

[TAPE] [D.C. CROWD](#): Stop the steal! Stop the steal!
[DAVID MUIR](#): Thousands storming the capitol after a rally with President Trump, during which he urged them to march on the capitol.

They've all brought America to a reckoning with its national character.
This is Episode 2, Whiteness.

Nell Irvin Painter is the Emerita Edwards Professor of American History at Princeton University, the author of seven books, and the one that we're most concerned with today is *The History of White People*.

With Professor Painter is Eric Goldstein, a professor of American Jewish History at Emory University and the author of books, including the one again, we're most concerned about today, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*.

So professors, I think a good way for us to start is to explain what we even mean, when we talk about whiteness as a conceptual tool, and whiteness studies as an academic discipline.

NELL IRVIN PAINTER: Okay, well I want to give a sort of framing to talk about race. Race, on the one hand —and if the audience could see me now they, they would see my one hand on one side of my body, being race. And the other hand on the other side of my body being racism. And I separate them, because we talk about race, as an etiology. It's a system of belief.

It's kind of like, it's like religion.

It's like religion. And it's a, it has some tenants within it. And one of the tenants is that there are races, plural, and some are better than others. And that there's, it's mainly biological, it's rooted in your body. And it's immutable, and goes from generation to generation, it's biological. So that is the etiology of race. It is an ideology.

On the other side, there's racism, which is the product of that ideology, and which has real material consequences.

People who were racialized, can have to pay more for cars, or for loans, they could be handicapped and seeking jobs or seeking promotions.

So racism has real material consequences that we call rooted in discrimination. And race is an ideology.

So I'm going to start there. And then I want to say, and I'll turn it over to Eric Goldstein, that I think for masses of Americans who I would see as white and if pressed would probably say that they are white; their main, their main identity is as an individual, not as a raced person. As if being a raced person belongs to people who are not considered white, and people who are considered white move through the world as individuals.

ERIC GOLDSTEIN: Thank you, I'd like to first say something about, you know, in trying to locate whiteness studies as an as an area of study, I'd say that first of all it's part of a larger trend in the academy over the last several decades, to use the tools and methods of critical theory to interrogate racial categories more broadly. And, you know, I think a lot of students today may not still be familiar with the idea of race as a social construction and what that means. What that means is that race is a category, you know, that we tend to think, as Nell was saying, as being rooted in biology and physical characteristics. But thinking of it as a social construction means that it actually emanates from a particular set of social-political-economic contexts, right. Which means that it's not

eternal. It's not immutable, but that it is created in a particular historical and social context.

You know, people will point to physical characteristics and say, well, but you know, people have different skin color, for example.

But that could take on many, many different meanings in different social-cultural contexts. And so we have to think about what are the reasons that people in the United States, among many other cultures, have chosen to assign that a particular meaning and to link it to a whole set of other characteristics, qualities, assumptions about a group of people.

So that's where you can see that the social, political, economic context kind of shaping the idea, rather than it just being a matter of fact, permanent, you know, by a category rooted in biology.

So, you know, in that sense, our understanding of race is a product of our culture, rather than something that's just always existed in the way that we know it.

And then, you know, whiteness, the idea of whiteness, and what we're calling whiteness studies, although I would argue that I don't think it necessarily coheres into an easily identifiable group, you know, school of thought. I think there's a kind of many different ideas in the academy, about whiteness, and what it is and how it works. But I would say that takes this thinking about race as a constructed category one step further.

And to kind of echo what Nell was saying that there's a sort of an assumption that race is something that only belongs to people of color, you know, and that whites are somehow just the default or, you know, normal.

And thinking about whiteness as a category, you know, it also interrogates whiteness as a constructed category. And it suggests that in crafting that ideology of race, that Nell was talking about, that white Americans in this example, because we could talk about whiteness in many different, you know, global contexts.

But in the American context, it points to the fact that in kind of constructing racial ideologies, white people were not just crafting a certain vision of what it meant to be Black, or what it meant to be, you know, perhaps Latino or something like that. But they were also creating a definition of who they were. And that those two things are linked in a binary.

I think I would differ a little bit, I do understand what you're saying about that whiteness provides the sort of freedom to think of oneself as an individual, rather than always as a member of a group. But I do think that the ideology of whiteness does also claim and attribute certain group characteristics to people who are white of superiority. Of an ability to participate in a democratic society, things like that. And you see today, and it's in its kind of most aggressive forums, white nationalism, talking about a kind of white culture, that's under fire. So it does that it can at some points claim the kind of group identity.

And that binary, that idea that ideologies of race and whiteness often invoke this kind of binary. And so you're either on one side of the divide, or you're on the other side of the divide.

This reminds me of the theorist, Jacques Derrida talks about alterity: meaning that groups and individuals craft identities based on comparing themselves and what their position is vis-a-vis some group that takes the position of the other.

[TAPE] [JACQUES DERRIDA](#): We know that the concept of race has no content. No philosophical, no scientific content. So it's racism which constructs or produces the concept of race. So we have to go from racism to race.

And he suggests that every society, every culture has its other.

[TAPE] [DERRIDA](#): There is no thing present such as a race - the race is something else invisible, spectral. The trace of the other. The trace of the otherness—not simply otherness, but another otherness of the other. Not simply otherness. But another otherness of the other which never presents itself as such. It's not color, it's not intelligence. It's just some thing which doesn't exist, which never presents itself. It's an alibi.

And so this is a helpful way of understanding how ideas about blackness, you know, are linked to ideas about whiteness, and that the two categories kind of reinforce one another.

SF: How is it that whiteness was constructed as air quotes, normal, or air quotes, mainstream.

In the sense that if you think about journalism, up until very, very recently, and it's still in-perfectly applied, if someone being written about in a newspaper article was white, the reporter would never think to say so and so is a white playwright, or so and so is white bank robber.

Racial identification was applied only to non-whites. And I even think in a different way about a blues song by the great Big Bill Broonzy, in which one of the refrains is

[TAPE] [BIG BILL BROONZY](#): This little song that I'm singin' about.
People, you know it's true...

If you're white, you're all right. If you're Brown, stick around. If you're Black, get back, get way back.

[TAPE] ...If you're black and gotta work for livin',
Now, this is what they will say to you,
They says: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
Stick around,
But if you's black, oh, brother,

Get back, get back, get back.”

- Which is setting forth a hierarchy of race in relation in counter distinction to the provability, the normativity, of being white. But how did we get to the point in this country, for being white was seen as the unexamined air quotes norm?

NIP: The category of white races — and I'm stressing, plural, races — goes back to the 18th century, goes back to the Enlightenment, goes back to the substitution of science for truth, as opposed to religion.

And as I said, earlier, the ideology of race has a lot in common with ideologies of religion, you know, you have to have faith. You have to believe. And but what you believe, say that you're a Christian, or say that you're a Jew — not everybody who considers him or herself, a Christian, or a Jew will see him or herself in the same bucket with others who accept that.

So I would add in time and place to understand the meaning of whiteness.

The point of what I have to say about whiteness is that it is a very unstable category. We, in the United States, tend to think of whiteness or Caucasians, as a monolith. You're either in or you're out. That is a construction with its roots in the 20th century, the mid-20th century. And before the mid-20th century, ordinary people as well as scholars understood that there was more than one white race.

There was the Celtic race, there was the northern Italian race, there was the southern Italian race, there were East European-Hebrew race. So there were lots of different races who were white, they were all white. But they were various, they were in various spaces, in racial in the racial hierarchy. So we need to understand the multiplicity as well as the simplicity of the construction of American whiteness.

EG: I have a slightly different way of understanding what Nell is explaining, because my, my sense of race and how race was understood and deployed in the, you know, 18th, 19th, and early 20th century was that it wasn't always very coherent, and that there were sometimes different racial maps different racial systems that were contradicting one another and bumping up against one another.

So the idea of different white races, yes, that there were people spoke often of the Celtic race, the Hebrew race, the Teutonic race. And, to some extent, that is a racial map that originated in Europe and grew out of a different set of political and economic and social circumstances. That was somewhat alien to the American setting.

And yet, you know, we can already speak about a global world at that time, in which people traveled people, you know, populations intersected. And so especially as a country that received many immigrants in the 19th and 20th century, these different ways of understanding categories and people bump up against one another and interact.

And so it becomes really a challenge in the American setting to make sense of, you know, what does race mean? You know, how do these different ideas there's an idea that German people or Jewish people or Italian people are somehow different than say, Anglo Saxon people, but is that different, the same, you know, how does that fit with the way that in the in the United States there have been a more traditional understanding of race as having to do with color.

And so I see from, say, the mid-19th century through World War II being a period of particular confusion and particular lack of clarity and troubling of the very meaning of race.

And at the same time, I do agree that in some ways from the moment of arrival, immigrants enjoy white, you know, who we would call white immigrants, European immigrants, despite whatever level of marginality they had in the US society, they did benefit, often from the moment of arrival in certain ways, because they were seen by the larger society as white. For example, you know, naturalization laws were defined the categories in our naturalization law since 1790, was that naturalization was available to free white people.

And you can point to cases where that was sometimes questioned. And if it for example, in regard to Syrian immigrants, there were law cases questioning whether they met that definition, and even in the Jewish community, there was some fear that it would be turned against them. But by and large, you know, that's an example of a way in which immigrants, even immigrants that were totally ignorant as of yet of the American racial system, benefited because they were perceived as white.

There's a in the memoirs, I believe, of Isidore Strauss, who was a member of the prominent Strauss family who owned the Macy's department store, and several of the sons were held public office. He recalls how his father arrived as a German Jewish immigrant in the 1850s, and went to Georgia and was a peddler and perceived himself as quite marginal from the larger society. But that how he was received by white planters in a in a way that surprised him, given that he was a Jew and how he was used to being treated in Germany, because there was a kind of basic accommodation given to anyone who was perceived as white because the system of slavery, so divided society into black and white.

NIP: I just underscore a couple of things that Eric said. One is that there has never been agreement on how many races there are, and how many white races there are. There's never been agreement on how many, and there's never been an agreement on criteria, how you tell.

So I agree with you entirely there and with your story about Straus in the south, that one of the one of the terms that we need to keep in mind as we talk about race and about whiteness is place. Territory. Where not just when. to whom, for what purpose, but also where.

EG: That that points to the importance of social context, I just want I want to add just one other small detail to this, which is that I also perceived moments in which the idea of society being divided into a black white divide could falter, and that some have, for example, moments where anti-semitism is flared in the in American society,

I understand those as times when, for whatever reason, the set of challenges facing the society of the traditional idea of a black-white divide, did not, in some cases, always suffice to sort of bolster the confidence and of the white majority.

And so in certain moments they focused on, say, Jews as a somehow this group that was somehow upsetting the balance.

So there are ways in which, you know, at that moment, you could question the kind of stability of the black-white divide.

SF: Well, there's no question that it's always in play, and listening to the two of you talk, bring certain things to mind. Everything from in the course of researching one of my books, looking at a labor manifest from the construction of the Croton Dam in the Hudson Valley of New York in the mid-1800s, I believe, perhaps a little bit later, and there are racialized pay categories. And the lowest paid laborers are Italian laborers. They're at the bottom of the scale under white and under black labor.

Another thing it brings to mind even much more in the present was roommate of mine in college in Madison, Wisconsin in the mid 1970s, having a laugh at his very bigoted grandmother, but in a revealing way who said to him Oh, Dave, that Greek boy up the street married a white girl. So that a Greek American, at least in his grandmother's eyes, wasn't seen as white.

So these things are clearly in play and remain mutable. But I want to come back to something Professor Goldstein said before, that I think gets to the material and legal benefits of trying to be seen as white if you've come to this country as an immigrant and a refugee. So you're neither from the founding European settler stock, nor from the African-American stock.

And that is, you mentioned, a court case involving Syrian-Americans who wanted to be officially designated as white for naturalization purposes. There was a similar case, in the 19-teens involving immigrants from India, there was a case in the 1920s, a school desegregation case out of Mississippi brought by Chinese immigrant family on behalf of their children, in which, somewhat perversely, their argument against school segregation was that their children shouldn't have to go to the inferior Black school. Because as Chinese immigrants, they were white, that they shouldn't be seen as non-white, and then went all the way up to the Supreme Court where they did lose.

But it strikes me that the immigrant groups themselves were aware of how much there was to gain in being identified legally, or even just socially as white, you know, at least part of their daily lives, when they're living in a binary country, even while they're various white races within whiteness, that if the overarching umbrella of America is a binary one, we better make sure

that we're on the white side of that definition. So wouldn't mix up worth fighting for in that way, going literally to the Supreme Court, in some cases,

NIP: For me the, the way to tell who is, is perceived as white, and who can get the benefits of whiteness, in a political sense, in an economic sense, in a material sense, has to do with the vote,
That adult men who were considered white could vote. And if there were a lot of them, as in the cities of the Northeast in the 19th century and early 20th century Irish and Irish Americans in the 20th century, Italians and Italian Americans, the vote meant that the city, the county in the state had to pay attention to your needs, for roads and bridges, but also for jobs.
And I underscore jobs three different times. Because those jobs, we think of them most easily as firemen, policemen, and teachers. Those jobs, laid the groundwork for economic mobility, which is also a crucial facet of what we think of is whiteness.
So the access to the franchise, to suffrage, absolutely crucial.

SF: I also want to talk about what I sense is a key pivot point.
Dr. Painter, you had said earlier, the importance of the mid-20th century in sort of intrawhite mobility. The way people from various white races begin to have more access into this meta form of whiteness. And of course, what sits right in the middle of the 20th century is World War II.
And if you think back to anti immigration legislation, which of course starts in the late 1800s, aimed at Chinese and Japanese immigrants, but the 1924 was that essentially throttles immigration for the next 40 years. That's aimed at Southern European Catholics, particularly Italians, Eastern European Jews, Central European Catholics, particularly Poles. All of whom are seen as being inferior. They may be white, but they're inferior to the Northern European and British Isles, preferred immigrant stock.
And then World War II comes along. And as part of morale building during the war, something is invented that's called the Judeo Christian tradition.
And it serves two purposes.
One is to say that we're fighting for God against the godless Nazis...

[TAPE] **NARRATOR:** To combat those who preach hatred, men of all faiths and racial backgrounds are forming such groups as the National Conference of Christians and Jews, headed by Dr. Everett Clinchy.

But the other is to build morale in this fighting force that's going to include Jews and Catholics and Protestants who have not particularly gotten along in this country.

[TAPE] **CLINCHY:** We're talking about brotherhood. What do we mean by brotherhood? Brotherhood is giving to others the same rights and dignities we want to keep for ourselves. When this war is over there will arise some pretty tough economic, social and political

problems. But no problem will be too tough if Protestants, Catholics and Jews remain together when this war is over.
[Applause]

And it's also the time period when African Americans joining the military, adopt this ethos of Double V. Double Victory.

[TAPE] NARRATOR: 2:40 America's first negro sailor trainees are reviewed by their chief Lieutenant commander Daniel Armstrong, whose father led colored troops in the Civil War...

We're going to fight on behalf of this deeply flawed country and that will be our leverage for full rights after we return.

[TAPE] NARRATOR: Like all other Navy men, the first negro detachments of the Great Lakes Naval Training Center are strictly volunteer...

And more than that, for particularly Black soldiers, and Jewish soldiers and to a lesser extent, Catholic soldiers, they're fighting against in form of Nazi Germany, a form of racial and religious extermination supremacy that would target them specifically.

So then the war ends, and people come back. And one of the tragedies of the Black American experience is that Double Victory isn't honored. GI Bill loans after the war red line mortgage loans to Black neighborhoods.

NIP: My very own family. My father was not a veteran, but he was someone who wanted to buy a house and we did not have access to 30 year fixed mortgages. That was a material handicap to racism.

SF: And then I think what I would posit to you both — and please feel free to disagree— what does happen though for those Catholic and Jewish immigrants, or children of immigrants by this time, imperfectly but largely is coming out of the war, it's socially unacceptable in proper American society to have bigotry against those white races. Restrictive covenants against Jewish and Catholic home buyers tend to fall by the wayside. This idea of Judeo-Christian tradition becomes accepted political gospel in this country, and they are absorbed as never before into a meta-white identity.

EG: When you were you were asking about what the appeal of whiteness was what motivated immigrants to want to identify with whiteness. And I was saying that there were two there were two strands of that. One is the sense of aspiration that immigrants that European immigrants had to become a part of American society. To climb the social and economic ladder. To perhaps become middle class.

And that, that in that particular context, they came to understand that achieving that also meant becoming a part of the white society. You know, fully becoming a member of the white society. And taking advantage of all

the privileges that that offered. Although they may not have thought about it as consciously as we're talking about it now. But that was kind of embedded in, you know, if you look at images of advertisements from the 19– I found, even an immigrant newspapers advertisements depicting middle class life, to which immigrants were supposed to respond by buying, you know, soap and pancake syrup and things like that. The pictures are pictures of young white children being cared for by African American domestic servants.

And so in other words, there's a way in which American culture frames, middle class status, white middle class status in race, you know, racial terms. And as Nell said that they, you know, this also meant concrete benefits, concrete benefits of homeownership of, you know, employment. The one thing I also thought, want to say is that there was also another element of coercion.

Meaning that there was also a way in which the larger society pushed European immigrants to identify with whiteness.

They, that that these opportunities were framed in that way partially to co-opt those immigrants and to solidify what at times was seen as a fractious and unstable white population. And to solidify that notion that that society is divided between blacks and whites.

So on the one hand, immigrants had had a level of control in terms of pursuing their aspirations. But in another sense, they were entering a society which they didn't create, which they didn't, you know, they weren't the architects, and to gain those benefits, they had to conform to the ideas to the standards to the benchmarks that the native born white society set for them.

I think we, a lot of the literature on whiteness has focused on immigrant groups, I think for an understandable reason, which is that it's very easy to see in the history of Irish or Jewish immigrants or Italian immigrants how they came to the United States from societies where whiteness perhaps wasn't as relevant a category and then it becomes relevant, and that helps illustrate the idea of whiteness as a social construction.

But on the other hand, I feel like we in addition to that, we also need more attention on the dominant native-born, you know, white society, because they played a large role in setting the parameters of whiteness and in pushing immigrants to you know, adhere to the codes of whiteness.

What I wanted to say is another motivation for a lot of these groups, especially groups that on some level had experienced some level of marginalization or disadvantage, again, not not the same as, as those who weren't perceived as white in American society. But, you know, Jews, for example, in the 20s, and 30s, they did suffer some degree of job discrimination, there were neighborhoods that didn't allow them to come in. There were universities and schools and clubs that ban Jews.

And so for, it's critical that for groups that were partially accepted, who saw the promise of being accepted as fully white, but there were some obstacles keeping them out. That provided I think, even a deeper motivation, that to kind of pursue the opportunity they saw before them at because they felt they could overcome the level of discrimination, they felt they believe they could

overcome it, if they just conform to the, to the degree expected by the larger society.

SF: I wonder also, if you can talk both view about whiteness as a conceptual tool, and the ways in which it's either similar to or different than two of the other prevailing conceptual tools we've had for understanding the experience of immigrants and refugees coming into America.

One of them, of course, is the melting pot. The melting pot, boiled down very simplistically is that people come here with their different, you know, ethnic baggage, but they willingly surrender it to become some part of amalgamated, new American being.

But the melting pot, then is contested by or to some extent supplanted by the model of cultural pluralism. And sometimes, people like former mayor David Dinkins, Reverend Jesse Jackson would refer to it with the term gorgeous mosaic.

[TAPE] [DAVID DINKINS](#): I see New York as a gorgeous mosaic of race and religious faith, of national origin and sexual orientation, of individuals whose families arrived yesterday and generations ago.

And that idea, again boiled down simplistically, is that we hang on to our ethnic traits as part of our essential selves, but by coexisting amicably with other ethnic communities in this country, we will add something to the mix. We're the flecks of different colors in the mosaic or the spices in the stew. And that's what makes America, America.

And so what is different about understanding American history through a lens of whiteness studies, than understanding that you're trying to make sense with through the melting pot or cultural pluralism?

NIP: Yeah, we need to understand that there's a history here, that the 1990s and 80s versions that you mentioned also appeared in the early 20th century, notably in the 1930s.

And the problem is that people don't stay the same. So people change their clothes, people change their languages. So they can be the people going into the melting pot in 1932. But their children in 1942 are different. And their grandchildren in 1962 are different.

So both of these ways of trying to understand a multicultural multiracial democracy don't last because people change.

And I think a crucial thing that we need to remember is that since race and racial designations, how we think about a racial identity is so multivalent, that we, each of us, is part of the millions of us who make it and unmake it every day.

So that it's not simply this monolith that we encounter, and knock ourselves up against. It's, it's a, it's a, it's a river, it's fluid. It has laws in it. It used to have many, many more laws in it. But things change and individual action can make a difference. It may only make a small difference. But how we act

on a daily basis, does change the way race works and changes the way whiteness works.

And we saw that in a year ago, in 2020, as large numbers of Americans got into the streets to protest police brutality.

[TAPE] [RALEIGH CROWD](#): Hey, hey. Ho, ho. These racist cops have got to go. Hey, hey...

And they were Americans of many races and ethnicities.

[TAPE] [WASHINGTON D.C. CROWD](#): Police, abolish, police, abolish, police abolish...

And they changed the way we think and talk about race, and the way we think and talk about whiteness.

[TAPE] [AURORA CROWD](#): I don't see no riot here why are you in riot gear I don't see no riot here why are you in riot gear...

EG: I was gonna say I think a lot of those older models of group difference in American life themselves were theorized in a context in which whites were assumed to be the kind of normative group. And some of those theories didn't even consider African Americans as part of those models.

So for example, when Horace Callen wrote his his, you know, his ideas about cultural pluralism in the 19 teens and 20s, there's a footnote in there that explicitly says that, you know, these ideas apply to European ethnic groups and that the subject of African Americans is a separate topic for separate study.

And you see the same kind of thing in the 1950s, there was a writer Will Herberg who talked about the triple melting pot of American religions, and said that all the European ethnic groups of the early 20th century were kind of melting into religious melting pots of Protestant, Catholic and Jew. And if you read that work closely, there's also again, a footnote saying that the issue of, you know, African Americans and Asian Americans, and, you know, these groups of color are a separate, you know, the topic for a separate study. So there was an assumption that they were talking about these ways of, of, you know, immigrant accommodation, they were specifically really referring to European immigrants. And those theories weren't yet addressing the issue of a broader society of all sorts of difference.

NIP: By the 70s, the unmeltable ethnics were squeaking and letting us know that they weren't melting tuite. They did feel different. And so when I published the History of White People, I would often get people sending me emails and notes saying I grew up Jewish in the 1950s, or 60s, and I got beaten up for it. I grew up Catholic in the 1950s, and 60s, and I got beaten up for it. So no, the melting pot didn't melt everybody down.

SF: And what does whiteness studies tell us about the experience of post 1965 immigrants and refugees because we've been talking up to this point about the history of earlier centuries and the history of African Americans, the history of white ethnics who came here in the late 1800s, early 1900s. And then after this almost 40-year, near complete halt on immigration, after the restriction law of 1924, immigration stores are reopened on a broad basis in 1965.

[TAPE] [LYNDON B. JOHNSON](#): “This bill says simply, that from this day forth those wishing to emigrate to America shall be admitted on the basis of their skills and their close relationships to those already here.

...the fairness of this standard is so self-evident that we may well wonder why it has not always been applied.

And somewhat actually against the intention of the people who drafted the law, it begins to lead to large-scale immigration from unexpected sources: South Asia, East Asia, the Caribbean Basin, South America, Central America, the Arab portions of the Middle East, and Subsaharan Africa.

There are large numbers of incoming immigrants from all those places, whether we're talking about Korea, you know, Nigeria, Senegal, the Dominican Republic, etc,

NIP: ...and Central and South America.

So what we get by 2000 is the census trying to make sense of this by talking about ethnicity. It's not talking about the unmountable ethics of the 1970s. This is a people whose, whose first language is Spanish, or in my neighborhood of Newark, Portuguese. And so we start talking about ethnicity in a 21st century way.

[TAPE] [CAROLYN MALONEY](#): Good morning. Thank you for being here today. The 2020 census is now underway...

[STEPHEN LYNCH](#): The chair recognizes the gentlewoman from Michigan, Ms. Tlaib, for five minutes.

[RASHIDA TLAIB](#): But something I am particularly concerned about is the lack of representation on the form of people who look like me...

And what is changing, and we see it now in our popular culture and in the arts that hyphenated identities are coming to the fore in the arts and in popular culture in ways that could not have happened in the 20th century.

[TAPE] The Census Bureau announced, under the current Administration, that MENA category would not be included in the census. Dr. Dillingham, do I look white to you?

What I find so interesting, in terms of African American Studies, is the prominence of people who consider themselves African American, or as my Princeton students would say, African African Americans.

Whose parents usually were grandparents, were immigrants, largely from Nigeria. It's the largest Sub Saharan African source of immigrants and their characteristics, I believe it's correct that they are the most educated group of immigrants.

Those are not the character, the social characteristics of the sort of speak indigenous African American population.

So that's just one example of the way that immigrants are changing the way we are thinking and we'll have to continue thinking about race and ethnicity.

SF: How, again, through this lens of whiteness and white studies, do we make sense of the two epic events we've been through as a nation in the last year? The first as Professor Painter already referred to was the Black Lives Matter movement. The second was the 2020 election. What does whiteness studies say about each of those social and political phenomena?

EG: The society has become even more polarized, you know, in the last several years and, and I, one of the things I noticed, that's, to me stands out as different since I wrote my book 15 years ago, is that there's much more discussion and awareness of things like white privilege and thinking about structural racism. That activists and scholars and others have really hope I'm hoping succeeded in bringing that as an agenda item in a way that I think it wasn't decades ago.

And I think that's led to a lot more deep thinking about what it means to dismantle structural racism and the legacy of some of these aspects of American society. And I think a lot of immigrant and ethnic groups today are puzzling and more intensively about what all of this means for them and how they fit into American society.

Although there were these groups that you know, consider the unmeltable ethnics and whiteness didn't succeed in kind of obliterating diversity among European groups and other groups, it did put tremendous pressure on them to not be too different in certain ways that it constrains the degree to which they could be different from the majority white culture. And I think in this way, it's important to realize that racial hierarchy that structural racism, white privilege, besides making African Americans and people of color, the primary other group in American society. It constrains the possibility for different for a whole panoply of groups. And even if groups don't feel that they neatly fit into the black-white divide, I think that the way that our society has been structured in that way it limits it constrains expressions of diversity.

And I think that we truly will not achieve a society in which all groups, all immigrant groups, national groups, people from different countries, can at once be part of an American society, but also, you know, assert their difference and celebrate their difference, relies on the ultimately on the dismantling of those structures of racism.

NIP: Yeah, you ask about 2020. What difference that made. For me, you know, I think you know, that, in addition to being a talking head and an historian, and I'm also a visual artist. So I actually made a piece of art a year ago, called from slavery to freedom.

And it captures in text and images, my, my feelings, my emotions, and hope, actually.

For some of the reasons that Eric mentioned.

So I, for me, 2020 even though there was this terrible pandemic, and loss of life and suffering, suffering, physical and economic, there was also an upwelling of tens, hundreds of thousands of Americans have many different racial ethnic backgrounds, saying no to police brutality, and saying yes to anti-racism and Black Lives Matter.

But as this is going on, there has been the backlash that you mentioned of the election, with millions of people voting for someone who stands for white nationalism. And even more than that, the Capitol Riot of January 6.

[TAPE] [ALEX MARQUARDT](#): I'm watching as we speak throngs of protestors climbing the steps on the western side of the capitol. They have reached onto the terrace of the capitol...

So there is a backlash.

But the backlash includes outbreaks of anti-semitic violence, and anti-Asian violence.

[TAPE] [LESTER HOLT](#): There is new data out showing 6600 hundred anti-asian hate incidents have been reported to the groups stop AAIP hate, since March 2020.

And that has made a difference in those communities. As Eric said, there's the attraction of pushing away identification with African Americans. Or suffering the disabilities of African Americans. However, African Americans have a long tradition of, of activism, for civil rights for citizen rights. And so the groups that were subject to the backlash, such as Asian Americans realize how much more they now see that they have in common with African Americans.

This for me just underscores how things continue to change.

SF: I'd like to thank my guests Nell Irvin Painter, the Emerita Edwards Professor of American History at Princeton University and Eric Goldstein, a professor of American Jewish History at Emory University.

How We Got Here is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism in partnership with Columbia Journalism Review.

This episode was created by me, Sam Freedman. Joanne Faryon is our producer. Meg Britton-Mehlish and Allie Pitchon are our associate producers. Sound design and mixing by Peter Leonard.

Additional audio engineering by Jim Bittel and A.J. Mangone. Winnie O'Kelley is our executive producer and Dean of Academic Affairs here at the J-school.

Original theme music - The Lens - by Peter Leonard. Other music by Blue Dot Sessions.

Liann Herder created our podcast logo. Jueni Tran is our production coordinator. Special thanks to Dolores Barclay, Andre Wood, Donna Mehrabi, Andrew Lynagh, Laura Muha and Michelle Wilson.

You can find other episodes, additional resources and a full list of music and other credits at [HWGH - Dot - Org](http://HWGH-Dot-Org). That's H W G H DOT ORG