

RACE - THE POWER OF AN ILLUSION

Episode Three: The House We Live In

Transcript

(1:00:51)

NARRATOR: It is all around us. It is an illusion and yet profoundly real. What we perceive as race is one of the first things we notice about each other. Skin: darker or lighter. Eyes: round or almond, blue, black, brown. Hair: curly, straight, blond, or dark. And attached to these characteristics is a mosaic of values, assumptions and historical meanings. Even those of us who claim we don't believe the stereotypes can easily recite them.

JOSEPH GRAVES, Geneticist: The average person on the street thinks that race consists of differences in physical appearance. They also think that from looking at a person's physical appearance, that they can find out or know more subtle things about them. Race is not a level of biological division that we find in anatomically modern humans. There are no subspecies in the human beings that live today.

ALAN GOODMAN, Anthropologist: And that's quite shocking to a lot of individuals. When you look and you think you see race, to be told that no, you don't see race, you just think you see race. That-it's based on your cultural lens, that's extremely challenging.

NARRATOR: Just because race isn't a biological reality doesn't mean it isn't real. Being classified as Asian, or Black or Latino has never carried the same advantages in our society as being white.

MELVIN OLIVER, Sociologist: Race in itself means nothing--the markers of race, skin color, hair texture, the things that we identify as the racial markers, mean nothing unless they are given social meaning and unless there's public policy and private actions that act upon those kinds of characteristics. That creates race.

NARRATOR: Physical differences don't make race. What makes race are the laws and practices that affect life chances and opportunities based on those differences. If we look carefully, we can see how our institutions and policies have assigned racial identities and reinforced racial inequality throughout the 20th century.

MAE NGAI, Historian: And this is something I think that all immigrant groups experience in one way or another when they come to America, no matter what point in time it is. Because they come to a country that has historically always been highly racialized. It's a country where race has its origins in, uh, slavery, um, as well as in the conquest of Native American Indians. So anybody coming from the outside after that point has to fit into this racialized society in some way, and it's not always clear how people are going to fit in right away.

NARRATOR: At the start of the 20th century, as millions of immigrants arrived from all over the world, lawmakers and social scientists debated how all of them-including the new European arrivals-would fit into the hierarchy of races already here.

They came seeking economic opportunity, freedom, and a future for their families. Of the 23 million newcomers between 1880 and 1920, the vast majority were from Eastern and Southern Europe. Immigrants often worked the hardest, poorest paying and most dangerous jobs, along with the so-called inferior races already here: Blacks, Mexicans and Chinese.

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MATTHEW JACOBSON, Historian: Cities with enormous slums developed, as the ugly side of industrialization. Ugly both in terms of the aesthetic of American cities but also ugly in terms of the - the solidifying of class differences and class tension. As all of those things became apparent, uh, the immigrant became the symbol for - for what America might be becoming.

NARRATOR: By 1910, 58% of American mining and factory workers were immigrants. Like Mexicans and African Americans, Italians, Slavs and Jews were often desired as laborers - but also feared, seen as promiscuous, lazy, or stupid. Some saw it as a racial invasion. Charles Davenport, a famous biologist, expressed those fears in 1911.

NARRATOR: The population of the United States, wrote Davenport, will, on account of the great influx of blood from Southeastern Europe, rapidly become darker in pigment, smaller in stature, more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape and sexual immorality. And the ratio of insanity in the population will rapidly increase.

NGAI: And this was also a time when scientific race theory began to take off and people began to, uh, look at society and look at, at groups of people in more racialized terms. So, people were perceived as, as being separate races. So you had kind of a higher order of white races, you know, which were seen as the Nordics, as opposed to what many of the nativists called the lower races of Europe.

JACOBSON: There are various groups, like the American Breeders Association, the Eugenics Research Association, who not only are doing research on various racial types, in this case Hebrews, Slavs, Mediterraneans, what we would call now the Caucasian race, uh, would break it down to thirty-five, or thirty-seven, or forty-five races for study. And, uh, a lot of the language was beginning to get at the idea that those differences were actually, uh, rooted in, in reproduction, they were rooted in, inheritable traits. They were heritable, they were biological, they were immutable.

NARRATOR: The more the newcomers were forced into low paying jobs and diseased tenements, the more these conditions were explained as natural consequences of their innate racial character. Biology was destiny. Which side of the racial divide you found yourself on could be a matter of life or death. Between 1890 and 1920, 2500 African Americans were lynched in the South. In 1915, Leo Frank, a Jew living in Atlanta, was also pulled from a jail and hanged by a mob for allegedly killing a white girl. Writing about the lynching, a Black journalist wondered, "Is the Jew a White Man?"

NGAI: Some historians have suggested that these new immigrant groups from Europe, uh, were "in-between peoples," they were in transitional stage. When compared to, uh, Anglo Saxon Protestants, groups such as Italians, um, or Jews were seen as not being fully white perhaps, but when compared to African Americans, or when compared to Asians, um, their whiteness became more salient, became more visible.

NARRATOR: Could European ethnics become fully white, and thus fully American? By 1910, a new term was entering popular culture to describe the transformation of Europeans. The phrase came from the title of a Broadway play by Israel Zangwill. God, said Zangwill, would melt down the races of Europe into a single pure essence, out of which He would mold Americans.

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EDUARDO BONILLA-SILVA, Sociologist: So when the Irish, when Germans, when Italians were coming, and they didn't speak the language and they didn't know the culture, the idea was they will assimilate into Americanhood; they will become American, which in the American tradition has meant white American.

BONILLA-SILVA: But that melting pot never included people of color. Blacks, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, etcetera, could not melt into the pot. They could be used as wood to produce the fire for the pot, but they could not be used as material to be melted into the pot.

NARRATOR: Whiteness was key to citizenship. In 1790 Congress had passed an act declaring that only "free white" immigrants could become naturalized citizens. After the Civil War, naturalization was extended to "persons of African descent" as well. But it was the white citizen who had clear access to the vote, sat on juries, was elected to public office and had better jobs. Whiteness was not simply a matter of skin color. To be white was to gain the full rewards of American citizenship.

PILAR OSSORIO, Legal Scholar: In order to be a naturalized citizen in this country, you had to be categorized as white or Black. And almost everybody who tried to naturalize-- all but, I think, one case that went to the Supreme Court-- all of them were people trying to be categorized as white. So the court had to make decisions about who was white and who was not.

NARRATOR: Courts and legislators had long been in the business of conferring racial identities. In the South, to enforce Jim Crow segregation and laws against mixed marriages, courts had to first determine who was Black under law.

JAMES HORTON, Historian: And here's where it really gets interesting. You got some places, for example Virginia, Virginia law defined a Black person as a person with one-sixteenth African ancestry. Now Florida defined a Black person as a person with one-eighth African ancestry. Alabama said, "You're Black if you got any Black ancestry, any African ancestry at all." But you know what this means? You can walk across a state line and literally, legally change race. Now what does race mean under those circumstances? You give me the power, I can make you any race I want you to be, because it is a social, political construction.

NARRATOR: In 1909, American courts had that power. That year the U.S. Court of Appeals in Massachusetts ruled that Armenians, often classified as Asiatic Turks, were legally white. If Armenians could be designated white, what of the other so-called Asiatic races? Filipinos? Syrians? The Japanese? Could they also petition successfully to be designated white by the courts, and thus become Americans? In 1922, when Japanese businessman Takao Ozawa petitioned the Supreme Court for naturalization, many in the Japanese community believed his was the perfect test case.

NGAI: Takao Ozawa came from Japan, went to the University of California at Berkeley, uh, for a few years, then moved to Hawaii, where he had, um, a family. And he applied to become a naturalized citizen in 1915.

EDITH TAKEYA, daughter of Ozawa: My father wrote his own brief and everything. And he was really, uh, devoted. He wanted to become an American citizen and nothing would stop him. He was determined.

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NARRATOR: Japanese growers in California watched Ozawa's case closely. By 1920, a series of alien land acts prohibited many non-citizens from owning or leasing land. Without a legal designation of whiteness to make them citizens, Japanese immigrants could not have the full protection of American law, no matter how long they lived in the country. In his brief, Ozawa argued that his skin was as white as any so-called Caucasian, if not whiter. But he made a much more important, second argument.

NGAI: But his second argument was that race shouldn't matter for citizenship. What really mattered was a person's beliefs.

NARRATOR (quoting Ozawa): My honesty and industriousness are well known among my Japanese and American friends. In name Benedict Arnold was an American, but at heart he was a traitor. In name I am not an American, but at heart I am a true American.

TAKEYA: The articles would come out in the paper. I thought, "Ooh. What did he do?" You know, I thought only bad things came out in the paper and I was kind of ashamed, you know? And I was a child. And it was just the way we were brought up. I didn't have any Oriental friends. My neighbors were all Caucasian. And, so he was so determined to get us, well, when the time came, to be American citizens.

NGAI: The Supreme Court ruled that Ozawa could not be a citizen. Uh, they said he was not white within the meaning of the statute, and therefore not eligible to citizenship. And the court said, well, he's not white, because he's not Caucasian, and Caucasians are whites.

NGAI: He did everything right. He learned English, he had a lifestyle that was American, he went to Christian church on Sunday, he dressed as a Westerner, he brought up his children, um, as Americans. He did everything he was supposed to do, and, and yet he's told that he can't be a citizen, because he's not white.

NARRATOR: The Court ruled that according to the best known science Ozawa was not Caucasian, but of the Mongolian race. But the Court would not be bound by science in policing the boundaries of whiteness.

Only three months after Ozawa, the Court took up the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, a South Asian immigrant and U.S. Army veteran, who petitioned for citizenship on the grounds that Indians were of the Aryan or Caucasian race, and therefore white.

JACOBSON: And he makes the scientific argument, uh, having learned something, actually, from the Ozawa case, that he is Caucasian. He gets scientific authority to speak on his behalf, that in fact South Asians are included in the Caucasian race.

NGAI: So here the court was in a bind, because they were presented with, so-called scientific evidence that Indians were Caucasian. And the court solved this problem by saying that it didn't matter what science said, so-called science. They actually said white is not something that can be scientifically determined, but white is something that is subjectively understood by who they called the common person, the common man.

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NARRATOR (quoting Supreme Court opinion): It may be true, reasoned the court, that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today.

NARRATOR: The same court that used science to determine whiteness in Ozawa three months before, now refuted its own reasoning in Thind. Thind might well be Caucasian, the high court said, but he was not white. The justices never said what whiteness was, only what it wasn't. Their implied logic was a circular one: Whiteness was what the common white man said it was.

OSSORIO: The court often decided who was white and who wasn't based on whether they just felt that the person would politically fit well into the kind of society that we were trying to build. And sometimes it was pretty explicit that this was what the court was doing.

NGAI: There was widespread racial views that Asians were undesirable, that they threatened to contaminate the American society. Basically that Asians are too different. That they can't ever really become like the rest of us.

NARRATOR: The consequences of the unanimous verdict in U.S. vs. Thind were catastrophic for the Indian community. South Asians who had naturalized before the verdict were stripped of their citizenship and property. Vaishno das Bagai was a successful merchant, who fled British tyranny in India to raise his family in a free country. After his American citizenship was revoked, he took his own life. He left a suicide note for his family--and another for the public:

QUOTE: But now they come and say to me I am no longer an American citizen. What have I made of myself and my children? We cannot exercise our rights, we cannot leave this country. Humility and insults...blockades this way, and bridges burned behind.

NARRATOR: For the Japanese community, the verdicts in the Ozawa and Thind cases were equally devastating. Now, as "aliens ineligible for citizenship," many growers were unable to purchase or even lease land to stay in business. Thousands of acres were seized from Japanese immigrants and sold to white farmers. By the time the racial requirement for naturalization was finally removed in 1952, Takao Ozawa was long dead.

NGAI: The notion that Asians are racially unassimilable, and that they're ineligible to citizenship, uh, because of their race is something that I think has had, uh, a real enduring, uh, effect. The fact that they were seen as non American, enabled many Americans to see them as, uh, as the enemy, and to strip them totally of their civil liberties and to put them in, in internment camps during World War II. The legacy of this idea is that, um, even those who are third or fourth generation Asian Americans are still perceived as foreigners.

NARRATOR: In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which effectively banned Asian immigration until 1965. Johnson-Reed also cut immigration from eastern and southern Europe to a trickle.

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FRANK SINATRA (film clip): Your bloods the same as mine. Mine's the same as his. Do you know what this wonderful country is made of? It's made up of a hundred different kinds of people...

NARRATOR: World War II found the U.S. at war with Nazi Germany and Japan. Films like the 1945 Oscar-winning short "The House I Live In" called for national unity and ethnic tolerance.

SINATRA (singing): What is America to me? A name, a flag...

JACOBSON: And these other distinctions which had carried so much power in an earlier period--Celt, Slav, Anglo-Saxon--uh, started to fade away. They had no purchase because those distinctions didn't seem to hold the key to any social questions that were worth answering any more. The more important and more pressing political, social questions seemed to hinge on, on, uh, black and white.

SINATRA (singing): All races and religions. That's America to me....

NARRATOR: Sinatra's song was one of tolerance, but the line that sang of "my neighbors Black and white" was cut from the film.

SINATRA: So long, men.

NARRATOR: European immigrants were learning that whiteness was more than skin color. It was the privilege of opportunity. And above all, exclusive.

JACOBSON: There's this whole very standard narrative of the European mobility model. We came here with nothing. We worked hard. We, we pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps. And it's offered up as proof of the openness of the American economic order.

NARRATOR: Left out of the bootstrap myth of European ethnics, was access to opportunities closed to non-whites. Roosevelt's New Deal reforms offered many Americans a path out of poverty.

FILM CLIP: This social security measure gives at least some protection to 30 millions of our citizens...

NARRATOR: But the original social security program excluded farm workers and domestics, most of whom were non-white. And many unions locked Blacks and Mexicans into low paying jobs, or kept them out all together. Perhaps the best example of how European ethnics would finally gain the full benefits of whiteness, to the exclusion of others, would come with an innovation in housing at the end of World War II.

NARRATOR: It was a time when hundreds of thousands of GIs came home ready to start families, but had no place to live.

JOHN JULIANO, Realtor: Living space was at a premium. In the Bronx, they tried building Quonset huts and they turned to, to slums. All the Quonset huts just disintegrated. There were two families sharing a hut; one family at one end, one family at the other; and before you know it, they were, they were awful.

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FILM CLIP: FHA came to the rescue by insuring long term, low monthly payment mortgage loans. Home ownership was made possible for additional millions of families and stimulated a tremendous volume of construction.

NARRATOR: Veterans needed homes for families. They turned to a revolutionary New Deal housing program. It would racialize housing, wealth, and opportunity for decades, in ways few could have imagined.

OLIVER: In the 1930's the federal government created the Federal Housing Administration, whose job it was to, uh, provide loans or the backing for loans to average Americans so they could purchase a home.

FILM CLIP: Due to the stimulation of the national housing act, from every section of the country come reports of vastly...

OLIVER: In order to purchase a house in America prior to 1930s, you had to pay 50 percent of the sales price up front. The new terms of purchasing a home was that you put 10 percent or 20 percent down, and the bank financed 80% of it--not over five years but over 30 years at relatively, uh, low rates. This opened up the opportunities for Americans to own homes like ever before. The average person could own that home.

NARRATOR: If these terms sound familiar, they should. Because this is essentially the same financing scheme that allows most Americans to own their homes today. Federal programs and banks sank millions into the home construction industry. Their message to veterans: you can afford a new home--buy a new home now. On the outskirts of Baltimore, Memphis, Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver, and other cities, brand new communities sprang up. One of the most famous was a Long Island potato field, transformed into 17,000 new homes. It was called Levittown. Tax dollars helped make the single family home a mass-produced consumer item. The American dream had a new name: Suburbia.

HERB KALISMAN, Levittown Resident: You have to remember the people who came here in 1947, 1948 were young ex-GIs whose upper most concern was taking advantage of the GI bill and making things better for themselves.

NARRATOR: Before moving to Levittown , Herb Kalisman and his wife Doris lived in a cramped attic apartment in New York City.

DORIS KALISMAN: And when we began to look for an apartment, we found that the apartments were a hundred, a hundred and twenty five, hundred and fifty dollars a month. I know that's unbelievable today but it was too expensive for us. And, out here in Levittown the mortgage payments were 65 dollars a month.

WOMAN (singing in film clip): A brand new sink, a built-in oven, a new refrigerator, and a phone, a kitchen phone...

JULIANO: If you were buying a Levitt home in 1947, '48, '49, '50 and '51, you would get, this would be your kitchen: You would get a G.E. stove, G.E. refrigerator, and a Bendix wash machine, it would be part of the real estate.

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EUGENE BURNETT, Long Island Resident: We came to Levittown and we found the model house. And we walked in, and we looked around, and, uh, of course, in the eyes of a, uh, young man who was raised in the ghetto, so-to-speak, it was an interesting experience - interesting lifestyle, seeing all the new modern conveniences. Very fascinating.

NARRATOR: Eugene Burnett came home with almost a million other Black GIs. They had fought for the country in segregated ranks. They returned hoping for equality and the American dream. For many, that dream was a new home for little money down and some of the easiest credit terms in history.

MR. BURNETT: I went up to the salesman, "We're interested in your home, we're interested in buying one, and, uh, what is the procedure? Is there an application to be filled out?" So forth. So he looked at me. Looked around and he said to me. He says, "Listen, it's not me, but the owners of this development have not as yet decided to sell these homes to Negroes."

MRS. BURNETT: It was as though it wasn't real. You can't imagine - but for someone to come out and actually tell you that they can't sell to you - you know, I, I was really on a - oh, man look at this house! Can you imagine having this? And then for them to tell me because of the color of my skin I can't be a part of it?

NARRATOR: The FHA underwriters warned that the presence of even one or two non-white families could undermine real estate values in the new suburbs. These government guidelines were widely adopted by private industry. Race had long played a role in local real estate practices. Starting in the 1930's, government officials institutionalized a national appraisal system, where race was as much a factor in real estate assessment as the condition of the property. Using this scheme, federal investigators evaluated 239 cities across the country for financial risk.

OLIVER: So that those communities that were all white, suburban and far away from minority areas, uh, they received the highest rating. And that was the color green. Those communities that were all minority or in the process of changing, they got the lowest rating and the color red. They were "redlined." As a consequence, most of the mortgages went to suburbanizing America, and it suburbanized it racially.

JACOBSON: The racial logic adopts the principle that an integrated neighborhood is a bad risk, is a financial risk. That an integrated neighborhood is likely to be an unstable neighborhood. Uh, unstable socially, but therefore also unstable economically.

NARRATOR: When the white residents of Eight Mile Road in Detroit were told they were too close to a Black neighborhood to qualify for a positive FHA rating, they built this six foot wall between themselves and their Black neighbors. Once the wall went up, mortgages on the white properties were approved. Between 1934 and 1962, the federal government underwrote 120 billion dollars in new housing. Less than 2% went to non-whites.

MRS. BURNETT: I can understand an individual -- depending on his environment, or his family, or whatever, uh, being racist, but for your country to, um, sanction it, give him tools to do that, there's something definitely wrong there.

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MR. KALISMAN: I think we had the golden chance after World War II and we, and we flubbed it. Because, uh, here, here we had a GI Bill, that was, uh, uh, supposed to, you know--- that was available to everybody; but in a way they didn't make it available to everybody and, uh, and that was a golden opportunity in this country, and we missed it. We really missed it.

MAN (film clip): But you can always tell can't you. A town with good real estate people is a more substantial community, because more people own their own homes.

SECOND MAN (film clip): That's right.

john a. powell, Legal Scholar: Now it's sort of hard to believe that the federal government nationalized and introduced redlining. In a funny way, it wasn't just giving something to whites it was constructing whiteness. Whiteness meant, as, as in the past white has meant being a citizen and being a Christian; it now meant living in the suburbs.

NARRATOR: Only 50 years before, European ethnics were believed to be distinct races. Now in these new segregated neighborhoods they blended together as white Americans.

MRS. KALISMAN: We did have different religious groups. We were mixed up there, but, uh, we, we were an all white community, and I think it's an unrealistic world. I think there's something sterile about everyone being on the same economic level and everyone being the same color.

BILL GRIFFITH, Cartoonist: It certainly doesn't, um, promote, um, a feeling of a wider world--wider not whiter-- um, to live in place where there are only people that look like you.

NARRATOR: Cartoonist Bill Griffith remembers moving from Brooklyn to Levittown as a kid.

GRIFFITH: It's an untenable, artificial world. You're creating a weird utopia in a way: a, a utopia of, of, you know, middle class white people who are trying to deny that they were living in a multi-racial world and how long can you keep that up? You can't keep that up forever.

GRIFFITH: Whether there were going to be, Black people in Levittown was just--it would be almost the equivalent of saying, "Are there going to be Martians in Levittown?"

powell: Basically the idea of whiteness is who's included, who's part of the family and it has material consequences.

powell: Blacks weren't completely left out of the housing market. The housing market that they were exposed to was largely public housing. And public housing, first of all was built almost exclusively with some - uh, with a few exceptions - in the central city. And after World War II, we started building larger and larger public housing projects, which were called "vertical ghettos." All of a sudden you're concentrating large numbers of poor people of color in one place.

NARRATOR: Another federal program, urban renewal, was supposed to make cities more livable. 90% of all housing destroyed by urban renewal was not replaced. Two thirds of those displaced were Black or Latino.

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PRESIDENT JOHNSON (in film clip): Fair housing for all, all human beings who live in this country, is now a part of the American way of life.

NARRATOR: In 1968, President Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act. For the first time, racial language was removed from federal housing policy. Non-white families began moving into traditionally white communities in numbers.

BUNNY FRISBY, Roosevelt Resident: We lived in an apartment, a two, uh, two-family house in Queens. And when we came here, it was the first time we had bought a house, and I was looking for everything in the storybooks.

NARRATOR: In 1966, the Frisbys moved from Queens to suburban Roosevelt, only a few miles from Levittown. Like the Frisbys, many non-white families would discover the economic value of race in the real estate market. They watched as their homes and neighborhoods in suburbia declined precisely because they had moved into them.

FRISBY: When I moved into a neighborhood, I thought it would stay intact the way it was. On the street that I moved on when I moved there, it was predominantly white. Within two years, it was predominantly Black.

NARRATOR: It was called "block-busting." Real estate agents preyed on the racial fears of white homeowners to get them to sell their homes quickly, for less than market value. The homes were resold to non-whites at inflated prices.

RUTH GREFE, Roosevelt Resident: Well, they would say, you know, we're having Black people move in now. I will give you cash if you want to sell me your house. Do you want to stay with Black people next door to you? And that's the way it went on. And, uh, as Bunny said, a lot of the people just said, "Yes, I'll take the money, and run." And, uh, that's the start of the white people leaving.

NARRATOR: As more Black and Latino families moved to Roosevelt, real estate became more and more depressed, just as the FHA had predicted. But why?

CHARLIE WINTER, Roosevelt Resident: I have an idea my house is probably worth around 120 in this town. But what it would be worth in Wantagh, uh, or Garden City, or some other place, probably around \$200,000 or better. Now you're talking about \$80,000. ---You, uh, said to me one time about-- why do people dislike the Blacks? Well, money-wise, there's a reason. Not that you dislike the Blacks so much, but you dislike what happens when a community turns from white to Black.

NARRATOR: It wasn't African Americans moving in that caused housing values to go down in Roosevelt and other neighborhoods, it was whites leaving.

DALTON CONLEY, Sociologist: When a neighborhood, a previously white neighborhood starts to integrate, even if individual whites don't have personal or psychological animosity or racial hatred, they still have an economic incentive to leave. Because they recognize that others might make the same calculation and leave first. So you get a vicious circle where whites calculate that other whites are going to sell when a neighborhood integrates, therefore they want to sell first to avoid losses. And, they actually make it happen. They make white flight happen.

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OLIVER: And if you think about African Americans, if African Americans are 20% of that market, it means that 80% of the people are not looking in those places for homes. So the price of those homes declines or stays stable. And banks contribute to this by continually making loans in regions that are, um, on the rise, white communities, and making it difficult to get loans in Black communities.

powell: So there's a difference. There's a lack of symmetry that's important to keep, keep in mind. That, that, uh, so it's not the same when, when whites are all by themselves. Cause when they're all by themselves, they're taking all the resources with them, they're taking all the amenities with them. But when Blacks are by themselves, they can't get, they can't get loans. Uh, they don't have a decent tax base, there no jobs. And then that, that becomes associated with Black space.

NARRATOR: In the end, what happened to Roosevelt happens in many neighborhoods when white families and businesses flee: the tax base eroded, schools and services declined. The town was seen by county officials as a legitimate dumping ground for welfare families.

powell: At one point we had explicit laws that says whites are on top, and Blacks are on the bottom. Today, we have many of the same practices without the explicit language, and those practices are largely inscribed in geography. Uh, and so, geography does the work of Jim Crow laws, so many people are confused as to why after 50 years of civil rights, are our schools still segregated? Why our housing market still segregated? Why are our jobs still segregated? Uh, and again, a lot of this is a function of how we've reinscribed the racial geographic space in the United States. That structure is still what we're living with today.

NARRATOR: As homes in white communities appreciated in value, the net worth of these white families grew. For most non-white families who stayed in urban neighborhoods, the housing market open to them in the 50's and 60's was largely a rental market. You don't gain equity by paying rent.

CONLEY: Where one's family lives in America is not just a matter of, of taste and preference. You have the issue of housing and wealth. The majority of Americans hold most of their wealth in the form of home equity. So that's their nest egg. That's how they can finance the education of their offspring. That's how they can, um, sort of save up for retirement. Um, it's their savings bank, right. They're living in their savings bank.

powell: My family, like a lot of families, was in Detroit struggling to buy a house. You had a dual housing market -- one white, one Black -- a housing market with one, with a lot of demand; another housing market with very little demand. My father lives in the house that I grew up in. The house today -- a five bedroom house -- is worth about \$20,000. That same house bought in the suburbs would be worth today about \$320,000. So whites moving to the suburbs were being subsidized in the accumulation of wealth, while Blacks were being divested.

OLIVER: And these, uh, were public policy decisions in which, on one hand, people were given access to property, given title and subsequently wealth. And on another hand, where people were not given access to property, did not generate wealth and did not generate the kind of opportunity for the next generation.

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BEVERLY TATUM, Psychologist: So if you can get a government loan with your GI Bill, your newly earned college degree and buy a house in an all-white area, that then appreciates in value, that then you can pass on to your children, then you're passing on wealth. That has all been made more available to you as consequence of racist policies and practices. To the child of that parent, it looks like my father worked hard, bought a house, passed his wealth on to me, made it possible for me to go to school, mortgaged that house so I could have, you know, relatively debt-free college experience, and has financed my college education. How come your father didn't do that? You know, well, there are some good reasons why maybe your father had a harder time doing it if you're African-American, or Latino, or Native American.

powell: And the thing that's really, uh, slick about whiteness, if you will, is that most of the benefits can be obtained without ever doing anything personally. For whites, they are getting the spoils of a racist system, even if they are not personally racist.

NARRATOR: To glimpse one of the far-reaching consequences of racial inequality, you need only consider one statistic: comparative net worth or wealth. If you add up everything you own and subtract all your debts, what's left is your net worth.

CONLEY: Today, the average Black family has only one-eighth the net worth or assets of the average white family. That difference has seemingly grown since the 1960's, since the Civil Rights triumphs. And is not explained by other factors, like education, earnings rates, savings rates. It is really the legacy of racial inequality from generations past. No other measure captures the legacy, the sort of cumulative disadvantage of race, or cumulative advantage of race for whites, than net worth or wealth.

NARRATOR: Even with the same income, white families have on average twice the wealth of Black families. Much of that difference lies in the value of their homes. But what happens when we compare families along the colorline who have similar wealth?

CONLEY: When you make the right comparison when you compare a Black kid from a family with the same income and wealth level as the white kid, um, from the similar economic situation, rates of college graduation are the same; rates of employment and work hours are the same; rates of welfare usage are the same. So when we're talking about race in terms of a cultural accounting of these differences or a genetic accounting of these differences, we're really missing the picture, because we're making the wrong comparison.

NARRATOR: We want to be a colorblind society that values the content of character over the color of skin. The hope of the thousands of newcomers who arrive each year is that we already are. "I don't see color, I see people," the saying goes. But in post-Civil Rights America, is colorblindness the same as equality?

BONILLA-SILVA: The notion of colorblindness came to us from that famous "I Have A Dream" speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, where he said that the people should be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. And what has happened in the post civil rights era is that whites have assumed that we are already there, that we're in a society where color does not matter.

(1:52:17)

CONLEY: On the one hand, the civil rights era officially ended inequality of opportunity, officially ended de jure legal inequality. At the same time, those civil rights triumphs did nothing to address the underlying economic and social inequalities that had already been in place. It doesn't recognize the fact that the rewards, the house, the Lexus, the, you know, the big bank account, those are not only the rewards, you know, the pot of gold at the end of the game, they're also the starting position for the next generation.

NARRATOR: The wealth gap grows, the advantages of being white accumulate from one generation to the next.

TATUM: What are the benefits or the advantages to being white in a society that has historically given benefits and advantages to members of the dominant group? And if you are a person who has that privilege, you don't necessarily notice it.

CONLEY: So until we recognize that there is really no way to talk about equality of opportunity without talking about equality of condition then we are stuck with this of paradoxical idea of a colorblind society in a society that is totally unequal by color.

NARRATOR: Claiming we don't see race won't end racial inequality. As Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun said, "To get beyond racism we must first take account of race. There is no other way."

TATUM: And just as we're born into this system, we don't ask to be loaded up with stereotypes or omissions, or distortions when we come into the world. We don't ask to be in a structure which is unfair, but that's what we have inherited. Whether you identify as a person of color, whether you identify as a white person, it doesn't matter.

powell: I think we have to be uncomfortable with the present racial arrangement. Uh, in a sense, I think we have to be willing to be uncomfortable, willing to demand more of ourselves and more of our country, and willing to make the invisible visible.

TATUM: I think we all have to think about what can I influence? I don't influence everything, but the things I do influence, I can think about how am I making this a more equitable environment? I can ask myself who's included in this picture and who isn't, who's had opportunities in my environment and who hasn't? What can I do about that?

END