

Review - Seeing White

Written by Joe Turner

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JOE TURNER, JUN 14 2018

Seeing White Podcast Series

By Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, ongoing since 2015

IR scholarship and academia more broadly still tends to prioritise the written word. By and large this formally obscures how everyday practices, such as listening to podcasts or watching films, can play an important part in education and as sites of politics in themselves (although see Grayson 2015 or Bleiker 2018). These other mediums can be particularly useful when dealing with complex political issues. For instance, there is something powerful about the medium of the podcast and the way it can deliver a level of intimacy to the subject matter (say in contrast to the more 'rigorous' yet detached style that we might find with a peer-reviewed journal article). I pondered this whilst listening to *Seeing White*, the 14 part documentary series hosted and produced by John Biewen at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

Seeing White provides a necessarily political intervention. Alongside a host of recent artefacts with a similar purpose (Eddo-Lodge 2017 or this), its aim is to interrogate 'whiteness'. It is an attempt to address the often unmarked terms of contemporary racism. There are many academic books written about whiteness, though they are nearly all from disciplines outside of political science (Dryer 1997 or Ahmed 2007) and IR, which still largely ignores questions of whiteness (although see this symposium). I would urge E-IR readers to explore this documentary series. Firstly, because it creates a very clear intervention into the study of privilege and structural racism; and secondly, because of the way that whiteness continues to underpin and shape the discipline of IR. This podcast creates an important political space; one that is particularly affecting as a listening experience. Here, I point to some of the key issues raised by the study of whiteness in the series and offer some brief thoughts on how this can translate into questions that IR scholars are/should be concerned with. I conclude by considering some of the alive and important risks that come from using whiteness as an analytical tool (some of which are replicated by the series).

What is Whiteness?

Seeing White is orientated around the staged 'discovery' of whiteness by Biewen, who narrates how he encounters his own whiteness over the majority of the episodes and how whiteness – and white supremacy – holds renewed political interest in the United States with the inauguration of President Trump. As a white man, Biewen suggests that he has almost never had to think of himself as a subject of race. Instead, he reflects that even for white people, even those who may be used to talking about inequality and prejudice, race is still often viewed as something bound to people of colour (people who are racialised as 'non-white' – in itself a term which reflects the hierarchization of people along terms of whiteness). This is by and large how many students and scholars still view race and its place in our understanding of politics.

Race only emerges as an issue when there are clear acts of 'racism'. Or equally, when whiteness is viewed in relation to race, it is through explicit appeals to white supremacy or white nationalism (for example). The more nuanced ways that whiteness functions are often left unexplored, such as the way it works to hierarchize people, experiences, knowledge and in doing so structures the distribution of resources – capital, land, territory – and with it life and death (see episode 41).

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The key starting points for the series (and often for other academic studies of whiteness) is that those deemed white can ignore their own racialisation because it is the norm. But being ignorant of the effects of racialisation is the outcome of historical privilege and the working of race itself. Whiteness emerged out of colonialism and the violent organisation of people into hierarchies of the human. That is the way that people have been differentiated as human, not-quite-human and inhuman based on codifications of skin colour, religion, cultural practice, kinship structures etc. The series thus attempts to shed 'light' on how whiteness functions by exploring the historical emergence of 'white people' in the United States. Not just 'white bodies' or what might problematically be labelled as an identification with 'whiteness', but primarily whiteness as a structure and a form of politics (more of that in a bit).

The series functions to 'turn the gaze' on whiteness as the subject of enquiry and thus produces a compelling account of the history of race in the US, from the advent of slavery, settler colonialism, ethnic cleansing, segregation into the present day. This is achieved through a twofold strategy: 1) of investigative journalism and historical research, mainly delivered through interviews with key scholars such as Irvine Painter and Dorothy Roberts and 2) more collaborative and conversational moments with Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika who is Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University.

Disruptions of Whiteness

The familiar historical and investigative accounts offer compelling analysis (see for example episodes 31-34) and deserve our attention. For instance, the way acts of overt ethnic cleansing still structure the urban structure of US towns as well as cities (episode 39), or the reminder that American citizenship relied upon legal codes of white personhood (episode 40). However, some of the most intriguing developments occur in the more 'conversational' encounters. This is mainly thanks to Kumanyika's shrewd and insightful interventions. For instance, in the latter part of episode 34 he asks Biewen how invested he is in his own whiteness? Rather than merely working as an investigator to claim insights into a problem, Biewen's complicity in the very project he seeks to explore is revealed. This is taken up in more detail and explored in a later episode (37) but this rupture in the more standard approach of investigative journalism is revealing. It captures what is a significant and in many ways unresolvable tension in the series – that whilst treating whiteness as a matter of investigation it also relies upon circulations and orientations of whiteness (a point I return to later).

The Limits of *Seeing White*

The series is a fantastic resource and I urge readers to engage with it. Whilst I am broadly sympathetic to the content of the series, there are some notable issues worth raising, especially because they are relevant to an audience of IR scholars. The historical account of whiteness dominates much of the episodes. This is entirely justifiable and necessary. Eugenics/racial science, capital accumulation, slavery, segregation, genocide, housing policy, citizenship law, policing and white-on-black violence are well documented in the series. This does mean however, that the contemporary international politics of whiteness is underdeveloped (although see episode 41-44). This is partly down to the limited focus on the United States. Because of this there are perhaps missed opportunities to explore the way that contemporary forms of imperialism are bound to whiteness, from the war on terror, to current interventions in the Middle East, to immigration policy, to global capitalism (see Woods and Saucier 2015; Ashley W. Doane, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva 2003; Sexton 2015). On a very simplistic level this emphasis means that the series runs the risk of implicitly suggesting that whiteness is a more exceptional problem in the US – rather than a principle that still organises global politics.

The more limited application of whiteness is also reflected in the way that it is theorised in the series. The relationship between race and class is appropriately dissected but far less is said about how European (settler) colonialism was constitutive of gendered, sexualised and ableist processes. For example in the destruction of kinship structures and the imposition of Eurocentric ideas of domesticity and socio-sexual relations (see Spiller 1987, Lugones 2008, Smith 2016). This is not so much a critique of the podcast – there are of course limits to what can be covered. However, this does replicate assumptions about how race functions separately from other mutually constitutive processes. It also reflects a broader case of the continued sidelining of queer theory and postcolonial feminism (see Richter-Montpetit 2018). Equally, from the perspective of someone working in Europe, these underdevelopments are problematic

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because this silences the way that race thinking began in Europe and was exported globally through Empire. It helps ignore the way that race functions in Europe today (maybe the answer is that those of us on this side of the Atlantic need to make a companion to *Seeing White*).

Why Should IR Scholars Care?

With these underexplored areas in mind, why should IR scholars/students be interested in a podcast on whiteness? In engaging with the wider scholarship on whiteness and race-making the series provides a number of key insights related to the analysis of IR but also the politics of knowledge production. To say that whiteness is structural rather than an identity is to recognise, that whilst people racialized as white benefit from whiteness, it functions as an organising principle. This can be used to engage in the existing debates raised by those working on race in IR (for example Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam 2015; Owens 2017).

Meera Sabaratnam has argued that we should recognise the multifaceted nature of whiteness: Whiteness is *epistemic* in that it is about knowledge claims; it is about what knowledges have been deemed legitimate, real and 'scientific'; it is about *ignorance*, in that whiteness relies on an amnesia about colonialism and violent raced histories and contemporary experiences to equate white with innocence and in parallel blackness with failure, underdevelopment, deficit; whiteness is material, in that it is about the *distribution of resources*, whiteness benefits people so it involves investment in the project of whiteness to sustain and reproduce certain people over others. This relates to what Du Bois called the 'public and psychological wage' or 'wage of whiteness'.

Think for example of how making 'America Great' again is premised on an appeal to white constituencies in the US where 'America' is white/whiteness is 'great', where the relative privilege working class white people have is bound to their whiteness (see this). Or how the anxiety about immigration in the UK is viewed as 'legitimate' by elites – including many scholars – because it is about the expression of the (white) 'working class' (see Bhambra 2017 or 2016). This is the working of investments in whiteness (see Emejulu 2016). An analysis of whiteness reveals in Goldberg's words how often racism functions without race.

This approach to whiteness asks big questions of the discipline of IR. Calls to decolonise IR and the universities more broadly have had increasing media and scholarly attention. This has centred on universities as white institutions often benefitting from and complicit with colonialism. Here whiteness is constituted in the type of knowledge which is used to teach, that is produced and valued – from curriculum to practices such as the REF (or its equivalents), to tenure. It is also about who teaches and the environments of often subtle and unmarked liberal racism that permeates through these spaces of imagined 'meritocracy'. In 2016 Black professors represented 0.55% of professorships in UK academia. Hiring people of colour is often seen as desired but too difficult to achieve. Whilst the Athena Swan award and Stonewall recognition and internationalisation are lauded as the hallmarks of diversity, universities and faculties have very little to say about the recruitment of people of colour from within the UK. They don't like to talk about race 'at home'. As Sara Ahmed profoundly illustrates this is about who can move smoothly through such places, who is sustained and fostered, and who keeps meeting walls. Scholarship is bound to claims over what is knowledge. The scholar inhabits certain types of bodies. Those who don't 'fit in' are often made out of place as a function of whiteness.

Whilst 'critical' IR often appears dominant in the UK, this has done little to challenge whiteness outside of powerful calls to decolonise the discipline (Capan 2017; Krishna 2012; Haffner 2018). Ours is a discipline founded on the protection of white global dominance (see Vitalis 2018), which has written people of colour, women, and women of colour entirely out of the disciplinary canon (Krishna 2001). This is not a thing of the past but an ongoing alive problem – take for example citation practices, or the arrangement of international conference streams, or nostalgic defences of colonialism (which I refuse to cite). The excellent body of work that has emerged on race in IR is beginning to make head way into the discipline. However, outside of a few significant contributions IR scholars still show a reluctance to tackle whiteness as a structuring principle of scholarly and everyday knowledge and international politics. For instance, how might projects of 'diversity' or even 'anti-racism' also be constitutive of whiteness? That is delineating 'good' and tolerant white people from the 'bad'. This is replicated in 'critical' scholarship. Ida Danewid has demonstrated how calls for solidarity with refugees and migrants remain saturated by

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whitened amnesia and a familiar practice of 'forgetting' colonialism in Europe. This means confronting the orientation of scholarly work, who it is made for, how it both deals with and interrupts colonial histories and thought. For many scholars, including myself, these are intimate and inescapable questions that need our immediate attention.

The Risks of Analysing Whiteness

There are of course risks in following *Seeing White's* call to turn the gaze on to whiteness. The first is expressed well in the series itself – it enacts a connection to whiteness in its attempt to create and engage an audience. 'Who are we and where did we come from?' muses Biewan in the first episode. The 'we' here being a call to an audience already imagined and claimed as white – those who need to sense a shared story in order to participate. This is reflected upon in the series (episode 41).

When I claimed in the introduction that this was 'an affective listening' experience for me, I joined in with this constitution of whiteness. What is more worrying in this trend is that whiteness could become a reified category of identity where claims are made about its content and character. Ahmed following Richard Dyer has warned of the dangers of starting a 'white studies' discipline. We can see examples in scholarly work where whiteness is viewed outside of distinct relations of racialized power, or where claiming whiteness as a privilege becomes a badge of honour. The risk here is that this merely reproduces a similar logic to white nationalism and explicit calls of white supremacists.

In focussing on whiteness we need to do so in relation to the violence and dispossession it sustains and produces. Whiteness as a political project is always about the hierarchisation of people, knowledge, ways of being in the world. In this way it is always bound to colonial racism and with this anti-blackness. Forgetting this amounts to a further kind of white amnesia/ignorance. Robbie Shilliam in his recent work on decolonising the British academy furthers this claim by arguing that a focus on whiteness obscures how whiteness relies on producing and making people of colour, in this case people racialized as Black, as holding an intellectual 'deficit'. To take this seriously, as Andrea Smith has argued, means that challenging whiteness cannot be reduced to practices of reflexivity, or 'privilege checking' but must be orientated towards broader collective and systematic decolonising struggles. As the last episode of *Seeing White* infers, this involves the forging of new forms of politics constantly orientated to the violence of the past, present, here, there and now.

About the author:

Dr. Joe Turner is a Research Fellow in International Migration at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. His research sits at the cross-section of international politics, history and sociology. At its broadest, Joe's work explores the relationship between borders and violence in liberal states. He is particularly interested in how questions of intimacy are central to how we are governed. He has published articles in journals such as the *European Journal of International Relations* and *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Joe is currently writing a book manuscript on the way that 'family' and coloniality are bound together in the contemporary politics of mobility, it will be called *Making Love, Making Empire*.