

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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WHITE LIKE ME

Race, Racism, and White Privilege in America

[transcript]

Tim Wise: When it comes to race, we've overcome quite a lot in this country. Slavery. Civil War. Segregation.

We've even elected a black man to the highest office in the land.

But as tempting as it might be to celebrate these things as signs we've entered into a period of color-blind, post-racial harmony,

[VIDEO CLIPS]

CNN Pundit: We have to admit that we're moving forward in this world and that race issues are moving to the periphery.

Robert Byrd: I think those problems are largely behind us.

Wise: The fact is that racial inequalities still exist...

[INTERVIEW]

Michelle Alexander: Today there are more African Americans in prison or jail, on probation or parole, than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.

Wise: And racial bias still affects the way we view others.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Campbell Brown: I want you to check out this protester, see the sign he's waving there? That's the president made to look like an African witch doctor.

Wise: And when we fail to recognize this, we not only continue to do an injustice to people of color, we end up doing damage to white folks as well.

TITLES: WHITE LIKE ME

Wise: I'm Tim Wise, an antiracist educator and author.

I grew up in the South, in Nashville, Tennessee and, at a very early age, I figured out that race mattered.

Wise (cont'd): My parents were educated in a completely segregated environment and wanting me to have a different experience than they had had, they decided to send me to a preschool program at Tennessee State University, a historically black college.

In a class of about 20 kids, I was one of only three students who weren't black. The teachers, the staff, the administrators there were also mostly African American –and this meant that from a very young age I learned to respect black authority figures in a way that many of my white peers probably wouldn't have. And this seemingly minor detail made a huge difference in how I came to see the world.

It meant that most of my early friends were black. As a result, once we started elementary school and I began to notice how those black friends were treated differently by the teachers, it affected me. And even though I didn't really have a word for what was happening then, that racial division is something I remembered even years later.

[VIDEO CLIP]

College Students: Divest! Divest! Divest!

Wise: For college, I attended Tulane University in New Orleans. It was the late eighties, and I got heavily involved on my campus, along with other students, trying to encourage Tulane to stop investing in companies that did business with the racist government of apartheid South Africa.

[VIDEO CLIP]

News Anchor: These university students want their school to get rid of its investments in stocks of companies that do business in South Africa, to divest. It's become a rallying cry on campuses all across the country.

Wise: We spoke out, we set up shantytowns on the college quad and in front of the administration building in solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement. But even then, as I was becoming radicalized to struggles for equality and justice, I was largely blind to the privileges I was receiving in my own town.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Bob Schieffer: The situation lately has become more complicated in the wake of the killing of a policeman and the death of his accused killer.

Wise: Around this same time, just across town in New Orleans, a black man named Adolph Archie was beaten to death in police custody.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Archie Family Attorney: The minute it was discovered that Adolph Archie had died, everybody knew that the police had beat him to death.

Wise: I remember reading about Adolph Archie's murder in the newspaper. And I remember thinking how terrible it was, but I made no connection to what I was doing and the experiences I was having at Tulane.

But that all changed a few weeks later.

Wise (cont'd): I was speaking one evening at an anti-apartheid event, and a young black female student from a neighboring college, Xavier University, asked me, in the four years that I'd been in New Orleans, what had I done to address racism and apartheid in that city? Especially seeing as how I'd benefitted from it.

The feeling that came over me was like the way you feel when you see the flashing blue lights in the rear view mirror and you know you're busted.

Because the truth is, I hadn't done much of anything. I had the privilege of choosing to address racism 8000 miles away while doing nothing in the face of *de facto* apartheid conditions that existed right there in my own backyard.

It was a powerful moment, and it made me begin to reflect on my privileges more broadly -- especially my privileges as a white person.

[VIDEO CLIP – David Duke Campaign Speech]

Unidentified Man: The next United States Senator from the State of Louisiana, David Duke.

Wise: In 1990, shortly after I had graduated from Tulane, David Duke, lifelong Nazi, former Klan leader, most prominent white supremacist in the United States, was running for the United States Senate in Louisiana.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Interviewer: Do you sell things, do you pass out things called "nigger-hunting licenses," a nigger-hunting license?

David Duke: No we do not. I do not pass out, I do not sell that...

Interviewer: You do not but your lieutenants do, maybe you do. It says, "Having paid the license fee, he is hereby licensed to hunt and kill niggers," in caps, "during the open season in Texas." This is beautiful David, I mean, you know for a guy who does... it's also, I mean it's a joke...

Duke: But it is a joke, yes. It is satire.

[VIDEO CLIP – NBC News]

Tom Brokaw: When I interviewed Duke earlier this evening, he insisted that the campaign was not about his past but about taxes, crime and welfare reform. Nonetheless he did acknowledge that race is an issue about which he has strong feelings.

David Duke: There's racism going on in this country against white people: it's called affirmative action.

Wise: I was involved in the campaigns against him, ultimately working as the Associate Director of the Louisiana Coalition Against Racism and Nazism.

[VIDEO CLIP – NBC News – Duke Campaign Event]

David Duke: I appreciate it! I appreciate it!

NBC Reporter: His message appeals to many frustrated white voters who believe the Civil Rights movement has gone too far.

Wise: In the end, Duke lost the election – the Nazi was defeated – but he received a stunning 60% of the white vote. The next year, he ran for Governor and he lost again, but he still received a majority of that white vote.

And I remember sitting there a couple weeks after the Governor’s race, realizing that there was something truly frightening about the fact that 6 out of 10 people who write the same thing on the census form I do – that they’re white – were willing to vote for a Nazi.

I mean I knew they weren’t Nazis, but now I also understood they were willing to vote for a guy who was.

[VIDEO CLIP – David Duke]

Duke Supporter: You got a lot of good ideas that we’ve been saying for a long time, it’s time for somebody to do it.

Wise: What it told me was that as a white person, I had very specific work that I had to do around these issues because these were *my* people supporting this guy. And really, for me, it was a moment when I decided to try and use what I had learned to change that mentality in my own community.

[VIDEO CLIP – Rachel Maddow Show (guest hosted by MHP)]

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: Joining us now is Tim Wise, an educator, anti-racist advocate, and the author of *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*.

Wise: For more than 20 years now, I’ve been trying to better understand for myself and raise awareness among others about the centrality of race and racism to the history of this country – and how dangerous and damaging it is when white people like me are blind to racial inequality and our own privileges.

2. WHAT IS WHITE PRIVILEGE?

Wise [from lecture]: When you talk about white folk you say “white folk,” “white America,” there are always some white folks in the room that think “he hates white people.” I get that a lot. “You hate white people!” I want to clear this up because I don’t want to be misunderstood. I love me some white people. My wife is white. I love her. Those two little girls are white, which sometimes happens when you’re both white. I love them.

Wise: When I was in high school, we read John Howard Griffin’s classic book *Black Like Me*.

In the book, and in the movie version a couple of years later, Griffin, a white man, tells the story of how he darkened his skin with dye, medicine, and intense UV rays in order to experience what life was like for African-Americans in the pre-Civil Rights South of the 1950s.

[VIDEO CLIP – Black Like Me]

Shoeshine Character: “What’s the big idea?”

Griffin: “I want to find out what it’s like to be a Negro in the South.”

Shoeshine Character: “You kiddin’?”

Wise: Over the course of six weeks, Griffin recounts how he was harassed, followed, and threatened by racist whites.

[VIDEO CLIP – Black Like Me]

Racist White Character: “You better find yourself another place to sit!”

Wise: And in the end, he says that his assumption that blacks were treated like second-class citizens turned out to be wrong – it was closer to *tenth*-class.

[VIDEO CLIP – Black Like Me]

Racist Character: “You know what we do to troublemakers here?”

Griffin: “No.”

Racist Character: “Kill a nigger and toss him in one of these swamps and nobody ever know anything about it.”

Wise: The book became a bestseller and a sensation. And it had a profound impact on me and countless other high-schoolers.

But when I revisited the book as an adult, something stood out that I hadn’t thought about as a kid.

Toward the very beginning of the book, Griffin asks: “How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth?” Ultimately concluding that, “The best way to find out if we had second-class citizens, and what their plight was, would be to become one of them.”

[VIDEO CLIP – Black Like Me]

Griffin: “A white Southerner has to know what it’s like to be a negro, *really* know.”

Black Character: “And you know what it’s like, huh? After 10 weeks or three months or whatever it is, you know?”

Griffin: “No, I don’t know. And I can never know.”

Wise: Re-reading this, I realized the entire premise was off. Griffin was attempting to understand racism by momentarily occupying blackness. He *became* a person of color. And while there’s no question there’s real value in whites trying to understand and ultimately empathize with the experience of African Americans, it struck me that we rarely, if ever, turn this line of thinking around.

In other words, instead of asking what it’s like to be black, what if we just asked what it’s like to be white?

[VIDEO CLIPS – Students]

Student #1: I don’t really know what it means really to be white or what it’s supposed to mean.

Student #2: I guess I never really thought about it, but it was always a negative thing.

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Wise: When I ask students what it means to be white, what I hear from them is a lot of confusion.

[VIDEO CLIP – Student]

Student #3: The question ‘What does it mean to be white?’ It baffles my mind. I don’t know what it means.

Wise: Whiteness isn’t something we think much about. And in some ways that makes perfect sense.

[VIDEO CLIP – Student]

Student #4: In terms of white culture? It’s very general and very vague. Like I think, “hmm, sitting down and having dinner with my family.” But all cultures do that.

Wise: Because when you’re part of a dominant group, you’re not forced to spend a lot of time thinking about how you fit in or about how your privileges as a member of the dominant group might affect others who don’t belong to it.

[VIDEO CLIP – Student]

Student #5: In order to express ourselves we don’t have to fit into black culture of Hispanic culture, Asian-American culture, we can just kind of do what we want. And I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing, it’s just...

Wise: This doesn’t mean that all white people have it easy, or that there aren’t differences between the struggles of poor and working class white kids who have to work for everything and rich white kids who have things handed to them. Of course those differences are real.

But none of that changes the fact that throughout the history of this country, being white has been far easier than not being white.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Louis CK: Oh God, I love being white. I really do. Seriously, if you’re not white, you’re missing out because this [bleep] is thoroughly good. But let me be clear by the way, I’m not saying that white people are better. I’m saying that *being white* is clearly better, who could even argue? If it was an option I would re-up every year, “oh yeah I’ll take white again, absolutely. I’ve been enjoying that. I’m going to stick with white, thank you.”

Wise: And let’s face it: there’s no denying that white people in the U.S. have had privileges throughout history that people of color simply haven’t.

Consider the very first law passed by Congress after ratifying the Constitution... the Naturalization Act of 1790, which said that free white persons, and only free white persons, could become full citizens of this country. Basically, our very first law as a Constitutional republic gave white immigrants privileges that black people and immigrants of color and indigenous native North Americans weren’t given – all of it based purely on skin color.

And whether we want to acknowledge it or not, this kind of systematic white privilege and race-based favoritism is built into the very foundations of the country.

[VIDEO CLIP – FDR newsreel/ New Deal]

Newsreel Narrator: In 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt put his signature on the Social Security Act.

Wise: Look at all the social programs that pulled the U.S. out of the Great Depression and helped create the middle class in this country. Programs like job insurance, which provided cash to people to give them a leg up as they looked for work.

[VIDEO CLIP – Social Security Newsreel]

Newsreel Narrator: To show how job insurance works, let's introduce Steve, a Louisiana worker who has just lost his job. He goes first to the nearest state employment office to register for a new job. Steve needn't hesitate about going in, because this office was set up just to help people like him.

Wise: But while Steve in Louisiana could apply for job insurance, not everyone else could.

[VIDEO CLIP – Social Security Newsreel]

Newsreel Narrator: Of course, he cannot collect if he belongs to any of the groups of workers that the law does not insure. These are: Agricultural workers. Domestic service in private homes.

Wise: Agricultural workers and domestic service workers didn't qualify for assistance, and it turns out that this had everything to do with race. These two jobs were overwhelmingly held by black people and over eighty percent of all blacks worked in those professions. So the only way FDR could get Southern Democrats to support the Social Security Act was if he agreed to exclude these workers from benefits.

This was a conscious attempt by some in Congress to exclude as many blacks as possible, and the net effect of it was to give preferential treatment to whites.

[VIDEO CLIP – FHA Newsreel, “Model Mania”]

Newsreel Narrator: Thousands of people get a big thrill looking at model houses and a much bigger thrill when they buy one.

Wise: It was the same story with crucial housing assistance for the American Middle Class. Loans provided by the FHA, the Federal Housing Administration, allowed working class families, for really the first time in American history, to own their own homes.

[VIDEO CLIP – FHA Newsreel]

Newsreel Narrator: Home ownership is the basis of a happy, contented family life. And now, through the use of the National Housing Act Insured Mortgage, is brought within the reach of all citizens.

Wise: But the way the bill was written, the American Dream of home-ownership wasn't within the reach of everyone. For the first 30 years of the program, 98% of the recipients were white. People of color were almost completely barred.

Then there was the GI Bill, which provided immense benefits to returning veterans – including low-cost mortgages, loans to start a business, cash payments for tuition and living expenses ...

What the GI Bill didn't do is protect black veterans, who qualified for that assistance also, from the kinds of legal discrimination rampant in pre-Civil Rights America. The result was that the vast majority of those who benefited from the GI Bill were white veterans.

If a program like the GI Bill ended up disproportionately benefitting people of color, you know what we'd call that? We'd call it welfare – we'd call it a reward, a handout, a gravy train...

[VIDEO CLIP – GI BILL newsreel]

Newsreel Narrator: The GI Bill of Rights is not a reward, or a handout, or a gravy train...

Wise: But that's not the way it was described.

[VIDEO CLIP – GI BILL newsreel]

Newsreel Narrator: ...But rather an American way to make it easier for each man to take his place once again in the community and get some of those things for which he went to war.

Wise: And I'm not trying to say programs like these are bad. There's no question they've been instrumental in creating and expanding opportunities for millions of people. The point is that we're being dishonest if we fail to explicitly acknowledge how they almost exclusively benefitted *white* people.

[VIDEO CLIP – Social Security Newsreel]

Newsreel Narrator: Who is covered by the Social Security Act? People like these...

Wise: It needs to be understood that for hundreds of years, government assistance programs pumped literally hundreds of billions, if not trillions, of dollars worth of wealth into the hands of white families before people of color even got to the starting gate.

This is what we're talking about when we talk about white privilege – the structural advantages built into our very system that have helped white people, often without us knowing it, while making things more difficult for people of color.

[VIDEO CLIP – Students]

Student #6: For me, being white means that I'm treated as the default in a lot of cases.

Wise: Some of those privileges would be material: better job opportunities, better housing access, better educational opportunities. But some of them are psychological. Just the realization that I'm not going to be racially profiled when I'm driving around town or when I'm shopping in the mall. That I'm not going to be followed by store security because they think I might shoplift.

[VIDEO CLIP – Students]

Student #7: Before I got to college and stuff, I was more of a punk and what have you, so there were times where I would be shoplifting and my race occurred to me then because I was like, man, I feel like if I was any other race or ethnicity, I would be being watched by security. So I felt very... like nothing would happen, so I didn't really mind doing it because I didn't get caught ever.

Student #8: I read a paper where somebody was listing an experience where it was a group of females talking about what it's like to be a woman. And there was a white woman talking to a black woman, saying, "Well, we have similar experiences because we're both women," and the black woman looks at her and says, "No we don't." And she goes, "Yeah, but we're both women," and the black woman says, "No, because when you look in the mirror, you're a woman. When I look in the mirror, I'm a black woman." So it's that thing that you have to... It's that thing that you don't notice.

Wise: For myself, from the very beginning, I was seen as a bright and capable child and I was tracked into the higher-level classes. If I didn't do well, I never had to worry that it would be ascribed to my race. That someone might say, "well, of course he didn't do really very well on the SAT because, you know... he *is* white."

And this isn't just an anecdotal, one-off story. The fact is there are 20-25 years of research. Studies which have found that students of color all around the country are worried about confirming negative stereotypes in the classroom. Any fear that somehow they might live down to a negative group stigma directly affects their performance on tests. That's something that I, as a white student, didn't have to worry about.

And so we live with the legacy of inequality that began so long ago, but also the legacy of obliviousness that allows those of us in the dominant group to rarely even think about these matters. And even with all the changes and the progress we have seen, that is something that hasn't changed.

3. ISN'T RACISM A THING OF THE PAST?

[AUDIO SCAPING]

Brian Williams: We'll take another break in our coverage here as we look at some of the pictures of the gathering crowd in Grant Park, Chicago, Illinois.

NBC Reporter: This crowd, as you said Brian, they're expecting as many as 500,000 people to come out here...

News Reporter: Barack Obama seems on the verge of the presidency, who could've imagined it?

Wise: On November 4th, 2008, at a little after 10:00pm Eastern Standard Time, television networks began announcing the big news.

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN]

Wolf Blitzer: And CNN can now project that Barack Obama, 47 years old, will become the President-elect of the United States.

Wise: Almost immediately, discussion turned to the historical nature of the moment, and with good reason. For a country with such a dark history of slavery, disenfranchisement, and segregation to elect a black man to the highest office in the land... well, it made for an emotional night.

[VIDEO CLIP – NEWS COVERAGE]

African-American Voter #1: This is a wonderful day for the world.

African-American Voter #2: It is. Fantastic.

African-American Voter #3: History in the making, first African American president in the United States, this is beautiful. It's very, very beautiful.

African-American Voter #4: I know what my grandparents and my great grandparents really witnessed and really went through, so it means a lot.

Wise: African-American men and women talked proudly about how far the country had come from just a few decades before, when merely registering to vote could be a matter of life and death.

[VIDEO CLIP – NEWS COVERAGE]

CBS Reporter: A church where the pastor's own distant cousin was shot and killed for simply trying to vote in 1930.

Pastor: It sends chills up my spine.

Wise: White Americans too talked about the country moving forward to a better and more tolerant place.

[VIDEO CLIP – White people happy]

White voter: I think it demonstrates the best of America. I had a son born 8 weeks ago and I think he's in a better world now.

[VIDEO CLIP – ABC News]

Robin Roberts: Reverend Jackson, thank you very much.

Rev. Jesse Jackson: Morning.

Wise: Legendary civil rights leaders like Rev. Jesse Jackson, who served as an aide to Martin Luther King Jr. and was with him when he was shot, wept openly as he watched Obama's victory speech on election night.

[VIDEO CLIP – NBC NEWS]

Rep. John Lewis: I must tell you, this is unreal, it's unbelievable.

Wise: And there was a similar sense of accomplishment from Congressman John Lewis, who put his life on the line during the Freedom Rides in the 1960s to help end segregation in the South, and to this day bears scars on his head from being mercilessly beaten by angry white mobs.

[VIDEO CLIP: NBC NEWS]

Rep. John Lewis: The struggle, the suffering, the pain and everything that we tried to do to create a more perfect union, it was worth it. I just don't know how to express myself tonight. I am overwhelmed.

[VIDEO CLIP – ELECTION NIGHT VICTORY SPEECH]

Obama: It's been a long time coming. But tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN]

Oprah Winfrey: It feels like America did the right thing. It feels like there's a shift in consciousness. It feels like something big and bold has happened!

[VIDEO CLIP – NBC]

Brian Williams: We all grew up in school classrooms with some variation of this graphic. 43 people who have occupied the office – what do they all have in common, all the faces in these ovals? 43 of them are white males. That's the barrier that's been broken tonight.

Wise: It was an exciting night, and it was easy to get swept up in the moment. Clearly this election meant something: but what, exactly did it mean?

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN]

Anderson Cooper: Does anyone know what this means in terms of change of race relations in the United States, or perception of?

Bill Bennett: Well, I'll tell you one thing it means. As the former Secretary of Education, you don't take any excuses anymore from anybody who says the deck is stacked, I can't do anything, there's so much in-built this and that.

Wise: Did it mean that racism and hatred no longer posed a barrier to people of color?

[VIDEO CLIP – FOX NEWS]

Mike Huckabee: And yes, it should have ended this discussion of there is a glass ceiling beyond which African Americans cannot go. That's nonsense!

Wise: Did it mean that racism as we knew it had been dealt a death blow, and that a post-racial America had finally arrived?

[VIDEO CLIP: NBC NEWS]

Rudy Giuliani: We've achieved history tonight. And we've moved beyond something that has plagued this country from the very beginning – the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness.

Wise: Of course, no one would say that because Pakistan elected Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister in 1988, that somehow that meant there was no more sexism in Pakistan. But that was exactly the kind of logic we got from a lot of people on election night here in America regarding race.

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN]

CNN Pundit: We have to admit that we're moving forward in this world, in this country and that race issues, while not gone, are moving to the periphery.

Wise: These are the kinds of issues race scholar Imani Perry has been studying for years.

[INTERVIEW – Imani Perry]

Imani Perry: One of the things that happened with the election of President Obama is that he began to operate in the minds of some as an example that there were no longer barriers of racial discrimination in American society.

[VIDEO CLIP – OBAMA VICTORY SPEECH]

Obama: And those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes we can.

Perry: The argument goes, "Well, this person was able to excel. This person was able to beat the odds. So why in the world can't you?" But really, here's one person amongst 40 million who has done this extraordinary thing. What we need to do to understand whether the society is racially just is to look at what's happening amongst the 40 million and why it is that we have a belief in racial equality and yet seem to have such difficulty moving in the direction toward it.

[INTERVIEW – Charles Ogletree]

Charles Ogletree: We still have a problem with race. And I think that until we confront it and we address it and we work on it, we won't be anywhere near post-racial. And it's really not post-racial that we're trying to become. We're trying to become post-racist.

Wise: Of course, if you bought into this post-racial thinking, you had to ignore quite a few glaring facts -- first and foremost, the actual election results.

While Barack Obama won the popular vote by a solid margin, few seemed to notice that he lost the white vote in a landslide ... 57 to 43 ... or that in Southern states like Alabama and Mississippi he received only 10% of the white vote.

Now does that mean that every white person who voted against him did so because he was black? Of course not. But there's no question that for some white folks, that was exactly the reason.

[VIDEO CLIP – Pennsylvania McCain rally]

McCain Supporter: Bomb Obama! Bomb Obama!

Reporter: What do you mean, sir?

McCain Supporter: Get rid of him. I've had a number of people tell me, when he gets in the White House... [mimicking shooting a gun]. Strangers tell me this.

Wise: Even in northern states like Pennsylvania, it became clear that we were a long way from achieving the dream of a color-blind society.

[VIDEO CLIP – Pennsylvania McCain rally]

Reporter: Why are you supporting Senator McCain if you're a Democrat?

McCain Supporter: You don't want my true answer.

Reporter: Yes sir, I do.

McCain Supporter: I'd never vote for a black man.

[VIDEO CLIP – MSNBC]

Tamron Hall: Let me read some of the things that we've heard at these rallies or people have heard: "Kill him," that was the first little bit of sound, someone yelling, "Kill him" referring to Barack Obama, in the background. Then, "treason" has been yelled out, "terrorist" and even someone's heard someone at the rally say, "off with his head."

Wise: But none of this stopped the conservative pundits from blatantly ignoring this unpleasant reality.

[VIDEO CLIP – FOX NEWS]

Fox Pundit: The days of racism are over...

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN]

Bill Bennett: We have just achieved an incredible milestone...

[VIDEO CLIP: BBC NEWS]

John Bolton: And I take it, therefore, around the world criticism of the United States for being a racist nation will now stop, right?

Wise: They thought everything's fine when it comes to race in America and that it's time to move on to other things.

[VIDEO CLIP – FOX NEWS]

Ann Coulter: We don't have racism in America anymore so just knock it off with the charges of racism.

Wise: But in reality, the claim that we've gotten past racism and entered a post-racial society really is nothing new.

In 1963, when pollsters from Gallup went door-to-door and asked white Americans if they thought whites and racial minorities were treated equally in matters of housing, education, and employment, 66% of whites said yes.

In other surveys around the same time, Gallup found that nearly 90% of whites believed that black children had the same opportunities as white kids when it came to education.

[VIDEO CLIP]

James Baldwin: Six kids were murdered! In Birmingham! On a Sunday and in Sunday school in a Christian nation. And nobody cares!

Wise: Now bear in mind this was the height of segregation. A time when African Americans were forced to sit in the back of buses, where they were routinely refused service at restaurants, and barred from voting in elections. A time when, if they dared to protest these things or step out of line, they were fire-hosed on the streets ... beaten by police and white vigilantes ... lynched and often jailed.

[VIDEO CLIP – March on Washington]

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Wise: In other words, around the same time that 200,000 people were gathering in Washington D.C. to hear Dr. King rail against racism and injustice and call out for a better future, most of us white folks were sitting at home wondering why the blacks were making such a fuss!

[VIDEO CLIP]

Reporter: We're soliciting opinions on the Civil Rights Bill, would you like to give us yours?

Woman #1: I'm sorry but I don't think it's the time right now, I think they have equal rights though.

Woman #2: I think this is the most ridiculous thing that has ever happened. The negroes are just as free as we are. They have the same opportunity to work. I just don't understand it, don't approve of it and I'm going to stand up for my rights.

Wise: Americans have a long history of wanting to believe that everything's fine when it comes to race in America, and that it's time to move on to other things. And when we hear claims that we've finally entered a post-racial, color-blind society with the election of Barack Obama, we need to remember this history. Because the fact is, racial inequalities still exist and racial bias still affects the way that we view others.

TEXT ON SCREEN: Even with a black president ...

The median wealth of white families is 20 times greater than the median wealth of black families ...

And 18 times greater than the wealth of Latino families.

70% of students of color attend schools where the majority of students are black and brown.

And these schools are 10 times more likely than majority white schools to have high levels of student poverty.

College-educated African Americans are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as college-educated whites.

College-educated Latinos are 50% more likely than college-educated whites to be unemployed.

TEXT ON SCREEN (cont'd): And studies have found that white job applicants who claimed to have a criminal record were more likely to get called back for an interview than black applicants with no criminal record.

Wise: The truth is, there are large and seemingly intractable gaps between whites and folks of color when it comes to income, wealth, and educational attainment, even basic health.

Children born to African-American women, for instance, are more than twice as likely to die within their first year than children born to white women.

Even black women who don't smoke have higher rates of infant mortality for their children than white women who do smoke.

You see the same trend with life expectancy. African American women will die 3 years before white women. African American men: 5 years before white men.

Part of this has to do with access to quality healthcare. African Americans are twice as likely as whites to be uninsured and when they do receive medical attention, studies have shown that they get inferior and unequal care.

But even more than these factors, what the research increasingly finds is that dealing with racism and discrimination on a regular basis has incredibly damaging repercussions for black people's health.

But maybe the most disturbing example of all of how race-based inequality persists in America is our criminal justice system.

[INTERVIEW – Michelle Alexander]

Michelle Alexander: Today there are more African Americans under correctional control – in prison or jail, on probation or parole – than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.

Wise: Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, argues persuasively that America's War on Drugs has resulted in a devastating new system of racial control.

Alexander: Many Americans just have no idea the scale of mass incarceration in the United States because it's a phenomenon that does not affect everyone. It affects certain groups defined largely by race and class.

[VIDEO CLIP – News Coverage]

Reporter: Breaking news out of Contra Costa County, a drug bust...

Reporter: Two suspects charged in what officials say is the largest drug bust in Baltimore County history...

Reporter: The suspect's not home, but minutes later, he unwittingly walks into the dragnet...

White Police Officer: What's your name?

African American Man: My name? My name's Antoine.

White Police Officer: Got him!

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Alexander: The size of our prison system quintupled in a 30 year period of time not due to rising crime rates, but rather because we declared a drug war – a war on drugs.

[VIDEO CLIPS – Politicians]

Orrin Hatch: These people are wrecking our society.

Nancy Reagan: If you're a casual drug user, you're an accomplice to murder.

George H.W. Bush: All of us agree that the gravest domestic threat facing our nation today is drugs.

Alexander: And launched a get-tough movement that swept millions of poor people, overwhelmingly poor folks of color, into our prisons and jails, primarily for nonviolent and drug-related offenses. The very sorts of crimes that occur with roughly equal frequency in middle class white communities and on college-campuses and go largely ignored.

You know, a white kid living in rural Kansas doesn't drive to the hood to get his marijuana or his meth or his ecstasy or a little bit of cocaine. He's buying it from someone, most likely, of his own race down the road.

Drug dealing happens in all communities of all colors but those who do time for drug crime in the United States are overwhelmingly black and brown.

Once their caught, they're swept in to the criminal justice system, branded criminals and felons and then ushered into a parallel social universe in which the basic civil and human rights, that were supposedly won in the civil rights movement, are stripped from them. Once branded a criminal or felon, they're denied the right to vote in many states, automatically excluded from juries, and legally discriminated against in employment, housing, access to education and public benefits.

[VIDEO CLIP – Clinton Speech]

Bill Clinton: If you break the law, you no longer have a home in public housing.

Alexander: So many of the old forms of discrimination that we supposedly left behind in the old Jim Crow era are suddenly legal again once you've been branded a felon. That's why I say we haven't ended racial caste in America, we've just redesigned it.

Wise: It might be difficult to admit, but it's certainly not difficult to understand how this kind of racialized justice system ends up benefitting white people. We're not only much less likely to be harassed by the police when we're innocent, we're also more likely to get away with illegal activity when we're guilty. Congratulating ourselves on how post-racial and color-blind we are does nothing to change these facts, and in many ways makes things worse.

Alexander: I think these examples of black success help to blind us to the ways in which systems and structures operate in our society today to lock millions of people out.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Oprah: Something really big and bold has happened.

Alexander: During the Jim Crow era, examples of black success undermined the logic of the prevailing caste system. Today, these black success stories actually reinforce the logic of the prevailing caste system, the superficially colorblind logic that “it’s their fault they’re at the bottom and if they only tried harder, they could be President Obama.” And that simply isn’t the case.

4. “BUT... WHAT ABOUT US?”

[VIDEO CLIP]

Female College Student: Going for jobs and even applying to universities, you’ll hear everyone talk about “the quota,” they have to meet their quota of their diverse population in the workplace or in the student body. So, if there’s a lot of white females applying for a job and they have a similar resume to one African American female, she may get that over the white female, whether she has as much experience or not.

Wise: Everywhere I give talks – whether it’s in the Deep South, Northeast, Midwest or the West Coast – white folks ask me, “Well, what about us? Why don’t you talk about racism against white people?”

The undercurrent in all of this is the sense that efforts to curb discrimination against people of color, while admirable in the past, have gotten out of control and are somehow now hurting whites.

And you’ll hear this kind of thing all the time. People complaining about what they call “reverse discrimination...”

[VIDEO CLIP – Hannity]

Hannity: This is a case of clear and obvious reverse discrimination.

Wise: Complaining about affirmative action...

[VIDEO CLIP – Rachel Maddow Show]

Maddow: What do you think that affirmative action is for?

Pat Buchanan: Affirmative action is to increase diversity by discriminating against white males and that’s why I oppose it.

Wise: Or they say that since we have scholarships for black students, we should have scholarships for white students only as well.

[VIDEO CLIP – MSNBC]

Colby Bohanan: Dozens, hundreds, thousands of ethnically based scholarships that were for this group, that group or whichever but none of them were focusing on Caucasian Americans.

Wise: The implication is that, if we’re being fair, we should also talk about how white people are sometimes the victims of racism.

Wise (cont'd): In fact, when researchers from Tufts and Harvard Universities recently asked white people if racism against whites is worse than racism against people of color, most of them said yes – that the gains of people of color were coming at a direct cost to whites.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Female College Student: I'm really not proud of the statement that I'm about to make, but if I look at an application and I see "we're an equal opportunity employer," like that's great, A+ job. But in the back of my mind, I'm kind of like, "crap. I hope they don't have this kind of like quota thing, like you guys were saying, where they need to fill up a certain amount of different races. I feel weird saying anything about this just because it's just like, "Ohhh, this is what it's like," so. . .

Wise: And while there's no question there's real anxiety and fear when it comes to programs like affirmative action, the fact is, for every person of color who benefits from affirmative action in college, there are two white students who received preferential treatment because of their parent's alumni status or other family connections.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Wise [from lecture]: If, in fact, the concern over so-called "reverse discrimination" had any relationship to reality, people of color would, in fact, be getting all the good stuff. Some people think they are, I hear it all the time: "People of color are taking all the good jobs!" Where the hell are these jobs? In second life?

Wise: Another study found that only about one quarter of 1% of all the scholarship money in this country is specifically ear-marked for students of color. Which means that 99.75% of all that scholarship money is money that whites can compete for and the vast majority of those dollars will, in fact, go to white students.

There's also the fact that the schools attended by mostly black and Latino students are more than 10 times as likely as majority white schools to be places of concentrated poverty.

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN]

Wise [on CNN]: By the time anyone steps on a college campus, there has already been 12-13 years of institutionalized affirmative action for white folks, that is to say racially embedded inequality, which has benefitted those of us who are white.

Wise: But even though that's true, there's clearly this feeling among a lot of white people that things used to be easier, and that now, those good-old days are slipping away.

[VIDEO CLIP – FOX NEWS]

Glenn Beck: How did we get here? I don't even understand this America anymore.

Wise: And underneath all of that is a very clear, if unstated, racial subtext.

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN Newsroom]

Don Lemon: Time now to talk about what matters, and we're going to continue our conversation about all the vitriol going on in the country. I spoke with anti-racist activist Tim Wise about the tone of the Tea Parties being held around the country...

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Wise: In 2009, I was asked to appear several times on CNN to talk about the Tea Party, a group of conservative Americans who had been holding rallies around the country, clamoring for the US to return to a time of low taxes and small government.

[VIDEO CLIPS – Tea Partiers]

Tea Partier: Basically restoring conservative values to the country.

Tea Partier: Too much government but the government is never bigger than the people.

Tea Partier: Smaller government, lower taxes and individual freedom.

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN Newsroom]

Lemon: The author of *Between Barack and a Hard Place*, his name is Tim Wise, he told me there are some racist undertones to these rallies.

Tim Wise [on CNN]: Well, like I've said on this show before, it is the background noise of a lot of the opposition – not all of it, but a lot of it.

Wise: My point on the show was that while the Tea Party movement purported to be about things like big government, exploding debt and deficits, liberal elites being out of touch with the common man – in reality, there was something else going on.

[VIDEO CLIPS – Tea Partiers]

Tea Partier: We are losing our country. We think the Muslims are moving in and taking over.

Tea Partier: They're taking our liberties away. It's tyranny, it's a Gestapo-type tactic.

Campbell Brown: I want you to check out this protestor, see the sign he's waving there? That's the President made to look like an African witch doctor. That was a popular prop at Saturday's rally.

Wise: Along with anxiety and fear about the economic crisis, there's also been a lot of unease about the fact that we have a black president and that the demographics of the country are shifting in ways that point to a future where whites will no longer be the clear majority. All of this helps explain why some of these folks are so adamant, so angry, so upset that they, and I'm using their words now, want to take their country back.

[VIDEO CLIP – Tea Party people]

Tea Partier: We want our country back.

Tea Partier: We want our country back!

Reporter: Tea Party message to Washington that "we're going to take our country back."

Tea Partier: We're just plain American people who are mad and we want to take our country back.

Don Lemon: I've got to run here but just really quickly, I was at a town hall yesterday and I really had to take some people to task, very nice people, but they were using those buzz words that I don't think people realize all the time like, "real Americans," or "give me back my America" was one of the songs or "take back America," it's like where has... What do you mean by that?

Tim Wise [from CNN]: Well, when you stand up and you wax nostalgic and say things like, “I want the country that the founders envisioned,” when the country the founders envisioned was a formal system of white supremacy, excuse me if I find it a little hard to think that race is not perhaps playing a pretty big role.

Wise: After one of the CNN appearances, I got an email from a woman who was a Tea Party supporter, who was upset with my characterization of the Tea Party movement. She said that their calls to take the country back had nothing to do with race, that they were simply calling for a return to an era of low taxes and small government.

When I replied to her, I asked her to give me a year – a year that epitomized in her mind this era of American history. Which year did she, and the rest of the Tea Party, want to return to?

Her response was almost immediate, and not very surprising. The year she chose? 1957.

[VIDEO CLIP – Leave It To Beaver]

Narrator: Leave it to Beaver.

Wise: It’s a year that many conservative white Americans hold dear – and not just because it’s the year Leave It To Beaver premiered on television.

[VIDEO CLIP – Bill O’Reilly]

O’Reilly: Traditional America as we knew it is gone. Ward, June, Wally and the Beav – out of here.

Wise: For many conservatives, this was the Golden Age of American history – a time when everything was in its place, before all the struggles for equality and justice came along in the 60s and messed everything up.

[VIDEO CLIP – Glenn Beck]

Beck: Do you remember how that felt? Do you remember what life was like?

Wise: There’s this sense that we’ve lost something precious, special, deeply “American.”

[VIDEO CLIPS – Tea Partiers]

Katy Abrams: This is about the systematic dismantling of this country.

Tea Partier: We are truly concerned about the heartbeat of our country.

Tea Partier: They can have my country when they pry it from my cold, dead fingers.

Wise: That people are over-taxed, over-burdened and forced to hand over their hard-earned money to government bureaucrats so they can reward people for not working.

[VIDEO CLIPS – Taxes]

Gingrich: The fact is, Americans are over-taxed.

Pundit: The government is spending too much, that we pay too high of taxes.

Fox News Pundit: I mean everyone in America knows that Americans are over-taxed, hello. We pay more taxes than we used to pay at every level.

Wise: The only problem with the argument – it’s not even close to being true.

The fact is, the top marginal tax rate in 2012 was 35%. A lot of people today think that rate is way too high. But what was the rate in 1957? It was a whopping 91%. Nearly 3 times higher than what it is today.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Tea Partier: There’s too much involvement in the government. We can take care of ourselves.

Lou Dobbs: Our government is spending far too much and our federal government is far too large, trying to do far too much.

Wise: As for the size of government – in the pre-Civil Rights golden age, it wasn’t small by any stretch of the imagination. The programs created with the New Deal, which disproportionately and almost exclusively benefitted white people, weren’t just massive in scale, they were massively popular.

So why do we have this idea that the pre-1960s was this bastion of American independence and freedom? Of small government and low taxes? And why do so many people today want to go back to that mythologized past?

According to Martin Gilens, it has everything to do with our perception of who we think is benefitting from government programs today – especially those programs we like to call “welfare.”

[INTERVIEW – Martin Gilens]

Gilens: I’m Marty Gilens. I’m a political science professor at Princeton University and much of my research is on public attitudes towards anti-poverty policy and racial policy.

The major work that I’ve done in that area is a book called *Why Americans Hate Welfare*.

[VIDEO CLIP]

News Anchor: Welfare spending now topping \$1 trillion a year.

Gilens: The American public tends to view welfare recipients as undeserving, not really working hard to support themselves and they view welfare recipients as disproportionately black. Both of those perceptions are at variance with what we know about the reality of welfare recipients.

Wise: Even though the clear majority of people who benefit from government assistance are white, there’s this perception that welfare and other government programs are somehow a black phenomenon. Why is this? Well, Gilens says, it’s because that’s who we see on TV.

Gilens: Starting in 1965, media portrayals of the poor have been disproportionately African American.

[VIDEO CLIP – News Story]

Reporter: Esther Williams. 21 years old. Mother of a 19-month infant and a welfare client.

Gilens: If you look at either print news or television news coverage of poverty, you see far too many black faces relative to the true proportions of African Americans among the poor in this country.

[VIDEO CLIP – News Story]

Reporter: Alsonette Vargas, who has six children and a husband with a minimum wage job, reached her time limit in January without full-time work and was cut from welfare.

Wise: So when we see stories about the poor, the poor are represented by people of color at a rate that is far greater than statistical reality. But it wasn't always this way.

Before the mid 60s, media coverage of the poor consisted mostly of whites – it was the unemployed during the Depression, the people who fled the Dust Bowl, the rural poor in places like Appalachia. And the coverage of these poor white folks was overwhelmingly sympathetic and humanizing.

As a result, public support for social safety net programs was high from the period of the Great Depression all the way into the 1960s. But all of that changed.

[VIDEO CLIP – News Story]

FOX News Pundit: There are too many people taking advantage of the system. Why don't we spend some time developing a system that weeds out the cheaters.

Wise: Once news coverage, media imagery, and political rhetoric started to equate poverty with people of color, we began to view the poor, not as fellow Americans who were the hard-luck victims of a system that failed them, but instead as moochers who were abusing the system and undermining the nation's work ethic.

And the sad irony is that there are millions of white people in this country who need those programs too, and now they're not there. Those programs have been cut to the bone because the beneficiaries have been seen as undesirable, undeserving "others."

[VIDEO CLIPS]

Tea Partier: How long do we have to pay for slavery? Man, I'm talking about the people on welfare trying to suck out the economy of this country. Get a free house, a free car, free gasoline. They want it all because they think they deserve it. Well, in this country you've got to get a job and work.

Reporter: Did you get a tax cut this year from Barack Obama?

Tea Partier: I don't pay taxes. I'm disabled from a truck accident and veteran's benefits.

C-Span Caller: May I speak now?

C-Span Anchor: Yes ma'am.

C-Span Caller: I'm ninety years old and I just wanted to ask the colored man. Why don't colored people, instead of saying what we did to them, why don't they say what we did for them? They talk about the slavery, but since then they have given them welfare, free medicine, free everything.

C-Span Anchor: Ma'am I think this is more of a conversation about the relationship between the administration and the people on Wall Street and not necessarily one that's based on race.

C-Span Caller: Oh, OK. I'm not a racist. That was my comment, thank you.

Wise: None of this is by accident. The racial subtext that runs through anti-government rhetoric is the result of an explicit political strategy that's been put to use by conservative politicians for decades.

[Audio Clip – Lee Atwater 1980 Interview]

Lee Atwater: Here's how I would approach that issue as a statistician or a political scientist or no as a psychologist, which I am not, is how abstract you handle the race thing.

Wise: In a recently uncovered recording, the late Republican strategist Lee Atwater, one of the pioneers of race-based political appeals, was heard talking quite openly about how this strategy works.

[Audio Clip – Lee Atwater 1980 Interview]

Lee Atwater: You start out in 1954 by saying, "nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger," that hurts you, it backfires so you say stuff like "forced busing," "states rights," and all that stuff. And you're getting so abstract now, you're talking cutting taxes and all of these things you're talking about are totally economic things and the by-product of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites.

Wise: The idea was for Republican politicians to speak in a kind of racial code designed to turn white working class voters against government programs. The very programs that they, themselves, had benefitted from for years.

[VIDEO CLIPS]

Richard Nixon: The present welfare system has become a monstrous, consuming outrage.

Ronald Reagan: Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.

Wise: And this kind of thing runs right up to the present day.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Newt Gingrich: President Obama is the most effective food-stamp president in American history.

Wise: This is precisely the point historian John Bracey, a veteran of the civil rights movement, has been trying to make for years.

[INTERVIEW – John H. Bracey, Jr.]

Bracey: What the ruling class in this country has successfully done is to label social programs as black programs, minority programs, and then you can kill it.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Rick Santorum: I don't want to make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money, I want to give them the opportunity to go out and earn the money.

Bracey: That's the most foundational thing in American life. I mean, that's 'Obamacare.'

Glenn Beck: Everything that is getting pushed through Congress, including this healthcare bill, are transforming America. And they are all driven by President Obama's thinking on one idea: reparations.

Bracey: Virtually every normal kind of social program that would've kicked in in Europe in the 19th century, in order to help working people survive under capitalism, we don't have.

[VIDEO CLIP – Mississippi News Story]

News Anchor: While the state's budget deficit has reached almost a half-billion dollars now the state's Medicaid program has announced more than \$14 million is being cut to various providers throughout the state.

Bracey: There are people that won't expand Medicare. Like I just got back from Mississippi, they're debating expanding Medicare in Mississippi. They need every nickel and dime they can get in there from anybody. They should not question anybody. If Martians came and said, "we're going to give you something," they should say, "whatever it is, we'll take it," because they need everything. They refused. They have a political system that's still dysfunctional enough that they turned down aid for white people in Mississippi because black people would get some too.

Wise: This is how racism victimizes white people indirectly as well. American history is full of examples of white anxiety and resentment around race being used to undermine their own interest and their own well-being.

Bracey: The most obvious cost of failing to deal with black people as human beings is the almost million casualties of white people during the Civil War itself. By postponing the struggle to end slavery, by not dealing with it in a political fashion, you had to fight a war that lasted four years. That war resulted in the largest number of casualties of any war in American history. This is a war, an internal war. A war on this continent fought between white people on one side and white people on the other side. If you had asked them would they be willing to give their lives to free black people, they probably wouldn't have said yes. But by failing to see black people as people, by failing to see slavery as a detriment to the social order, it resulted in them losing their lives.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Bull Connor: You can never whip these birds if you don't keep you and them separate. I found that out in Birmingham. You've got to keep the white and the black separate!

Wise: In other words, for generations political elites have deliberately manipulated the white racial fears and resentments of the majority population, pitting white folks and people of color against each other for the spoils of a system that really none of them benefit directly from. Fighting over the pieces of a pie that none of them own.

We can try to ignore and deny this history. But we can't change it. It's real, and it's a part of who we are. The biggest challenge is figuring out how to confront the truth without being overwhelmed by it.

5. COLORBLIND

[VIDEO CLIP]

Robert Byrd: I think we talk about race too much. I think those problems are largely behind us. I just think we talk so much about it that we help to create, I think, somewhat of an illusion.

Wise: Many of us have come to believe that the real problem with racism is that we talk about it too much.

[AUDIO CLIP – Rush Limbaugh]

Limbaugh: We need to talk about race? We need to stop talking about race!

Wise: That if we just didn't talk about it, if we just didn't bring it up, nobody would know anything about it.

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN, Fox News]

Ann Coulter: I think more of the problem is the accusations of racism and that does drive the races apart.

John McCain: I think that we should be colorblind in every way.

Wise: . . . That we should aspire to be colorblind; that we should ignore racial and ethnic differences and just treat everyone the same.

[VIDEO CLIP – CNN]

Laura Ingraham: We really want to get beyond the hyphenated America, I mean I do – I'm half-Polish, Irish, English. We want to get beyond that.

Wise: Unfortunately, there are a couple of big problems with that approach.

[INTERVIEW – Imani Perry]

Perry: Well, one it's absurd, right? We obviously notice race all the time. If we didn't we wouldn't have evidence that people treat people in unequal ways on the basis of race but on top of that, colorblindness as an ideology is almost a willful neglect. I'm going to close my eyes to the reality both of diversity and the reality of inequality and injustice.

[VIDEO CLIPS – Fox News]

Glenn Beck: . . . Because America is about opportunity and chance, an equal shot.

Sarah Palin: Fundamentally, everybody is equal in America. Everyone has equal opportunity.

Wise: There's also the fact that if we don't have a context for understanding the kinds of racial disparities and inequalities we continue to see in America, then racist explanations begin to make sense. If the one story from American history that we've bought into is that we're a meritocracy, a colorblind society, that rewards people or punishes them based purely on how hard they work or how capable they are, then the entire history of institutional racism magically disappears and we're left to wonder, "What's wrong with black people who can't seem to get it together?"

[VIDEO CLIP – The Adam Carolla Show]

Gavin Newsom: Half of African Americans in the state of California, roughly half of Latino families have no access to a checking account or an ATM. Things we take for granted – they don't have a checking account.

Adam Carolla: What's wrong with them? So they're flawed?

Gavin Newsom: No, they're hardly flawed, but they're struggling.

Adam Carolla: Genetically flawed? But why so many of them?

Wise: In other words, colorblindness by virtue of keeping matters of discrimination and racism under wraps can lead to an actual intensification of racist thinking. So let me give you an example . . .

In April 2003, on my way to a conference in Iowa, I boarded a plane bound for St. Louis. As I walked down the jet bridge that morning, I glanced in and saw something I had never seen in all my years of air travel – not one, but two black pilots at the controls of the plane. Now, you'd think this would be a welcome sight to me. And after reflection, it was. But that was not my initial reaction. Sadly, my first thought was more along the lines of...

[VIDEO CLIP – Airplane]

Flight Attendant: Alright now everybody, get in crash positions!

Wise: "Oh God, can these two guys really fly this plane?" Now, don't get me wrong. Just as quickly as that thought came into my head, I was able to defeat it. I knew instantly that such a thing was absurd. But in that moment, I was beholden to my conditioning. And I had been conditioned no less than anyone else to see people of color and automatically assume they aren't as qualified as a white person. Neuroscientists and psychologists have been studying this phenomenon for decades. They call it implicit, or unconscious, racial bias.

[INTERVIEW – Nilanjana Dasgupta]

Dasgupta: Implicit racial bias is the thoughts that pop into our mind. It's the quick, random, gut reaction when we think about a particular group. So when I see somebody who is white, how quickly and easily do good thoughts – good, healthy, successful, educated, smart – come to mind? Versus when I see someone who is black or Latino, how quickly do those kinds of happy, successful, educated, smart, pop into mind? And we typically find that people are faster at associating those good stuff with white rather than black or Hispanics. The reason why these implicit attitudes, preferences and biases make a big difference is that there's quite a bit of data showing that these implicit attitudes affect people's behavior in a whole host of areas that will either maintain, or sometimes exacerbate, inequalities.

Wise: In one test that looked at unconscious stereotyping, the vast majority of whites implicitly associated the faces of black Americans with negative words and traits like “evil character” or “failure” and they had far more trouble linking black faces to pleasant words and positive features.

Dasgupta: A rough estimate is that 75% of people who are non-black tend to show some degree of implicit preference for whites over blacks.

Wise: In the same test, nearly half the African Americans tested also showed a preference for whites over blacks. So none of us are immune, we're all subject to the same conditioning.

Imani Perry: One of the things that's so interesting about the unconscious bias research is that this is not simply white people having biases against black people and Latinos, this operates across groups. This is a culture that we have learned that practices inequality. This is not simply animus between groups but this is a way that we are socialized to treat people.

Wise: The logical question is – what can we do?

Charles Ogletree: You can't be colorblind because that means that you're not seeing the disparity and you're not trying to address it. We all have to see it, address it and make it real and try to resolve it, as opposed to pretend it's not there – It's there.

Michelle Alexander: The goal in my view isn't to be blind to one another, but to see each other as we are, with our full range of experience, all of our baggage as well as all the beauty that we bring and still love one another, still care about each other. I don't want to say to the young kid who grew up in the hood and who's being stopped and hounded by the police, “I don't care if you're black.” Of course I care. I care about you and your experience and I see you as you are.

Wise: The answer is being color conscious, not colorblind. It means confronting the truth about race and racism in this country and it means asking the tough, honest questions about how the history of racism in America continues to shape the present.

[VIDEO CLIP – Tim Wise Lecture]

Wise [lecture]: When you're a member of a dominant group it's very easy, isn't it, to view the world that way. To view the world as an individual, to not recognize that other people are not leading simply individual lives and neither are you. That's why people will say things like, "Well, I'm not white, I'm just Tim. I'm just an individual, I'm just an American. Why can't we just all be, why can't you drop the hyphen?" Because it's not your hyphen to drop, Jack. That's why.

Wise: In other words, we need to have an awareness about how racism, racial conditioning and prejudice have affected us as white folks. Unless we get ahold of that, we'll continue to go down the path of privilege and racism and inequality rather connecting to a very different tradition in our own history: a tradition of white allyship, a tradition of white anti-racism.

In addition to the typically pathetic way our history books address the contributions of people of color, very rarely is much attention paid to the average, everyday white folks who stood up and opposed injustice. People like Will Campbell.

[VIDEO CLIP – Little Rock]

Governor Faubus: Advanced units are already on duty on the grounds of central high school.

TEXT ON SCREEN: In 1957, when nine black students became the first to integrate Little Rock Central High School...

[VIDEO CLIP – Little Rock]

White Student: . . . Colored people here in the South have got better schools than some of the white kids like it is – let them go to their own schools.

TEXT ON SCREEN: Campbell wasn't one of the ones who hurled threats and insults at these brave teenagers. Instead, he walked with them.

Wise: Imagine how different the racial dialogue might feel for us if we knew of those white folks who opposed enslavement, who opposed segregation. Jeremiah Evarts, John Fee, Helen Hunt Jackson, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Robert Flournoy, Matilda Gage, Lydia Child. How helpful might it be for lessening our anxiety as whites, and allowing us to embrace the multiracial future of America, if we knew about the history of white anti-racism.

TEXT ON SCREEN: Meet Joan Trumpauer. In 1963, when African American students were protesting the racist segregation policies of Woolworth's Soda Fountain in Jackson, Mississippi, she wasn't one of the ones who hurled slurs and dumped salt on the protesters. Instead, she sat with them.

Wise: What if we learned of the alternative tradition in our history, the one in which members of our community said "no" to racism and white domination and "yes" to justice, precisely because they realized not only the moral evil of those systems, but also because they saw both of them as cynical manipulations intended to divide and conquer working people, to keep us at each other's throats. People like Anne Braden.

[AUDIO CLIP – Anne Braden]

Braden: The real danger today comes from the people in high places who are telling the white people that if they're taxes are eating up their paychecks it's not because of our bloated military budget, but because of government programs that benefit black people.

Wise: Virginia Foster Durr, J. Waites Waring, Constance Curry, Bob and Dotty Zellner, and Mab Segrest. Along with literally thousands of others who, in their own way, have demonstrated that there is more than one way to live in this skin. It's a tradition that fits with the best of the American ideal and can elevate that ideal to a place far more concrete than it's been up till now. And if we do that, there's no reason why we, as a committed and decent people, can't move to a different place as a country.

[END]