

A CONVERSATION WITH NELL IRVIN PAINTER

On The History of White People

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The Alphonse Fletcher University Professor, Harvard University

Nell Irvin Painter

Edwards Professor of American History, Emerita, Princeton University

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HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Nell Painter, we are in the Hutchins Library at the Du Bois Institute and it is full of books on White people's history. So why do we need another history of White people?

NELL IRVIN PAINTER: These books are not a history of White people with the optic turned around on the concept of White people. These books don't query what it means to be White in terms of race, which is what we Americans think of all the time. What I've done is to talk about the invention of race, and the invention of the White races in 1795, as part of the Enlightenment. And then I carry it into our own time in the United States. But I also go back before that invention to show that it's not something that has always been.

GATES: Many people are surprised when they discover, in reading colonial American history, that Benjamin Franklin said horrible things about German immigrants.

PAINTER: Yes.

GATES: In fact, in my latest PBS series, *Faces of America*, Steven Colbert makes a joke about the fact that you could take out the word 'German' and insert the word 'Mexican' and Franklin's remarks would be perfectly contemporary. How in the world could someone look at a German, like Franklin did, and say, "They're a different color than we are. They're darkening the race." Help us to understand that.

PAINTER: All I can do is point out that this is not the only time it has happened. So, to my mind, one notably pale group of people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Irish people—were considered dark because they were 'primitive' and, therefore, short and dark.

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GATES: Simian?

PAINTER: That was the term for the caricatures. But the idea that the Irish were dark was respectable, for the greatest physical anthropologist of Britain, a man named John Beddoe, actually made a map which he calibrated according to an 'Index of Nigrescence.' It was a map of the British Isles, but Beddoe wasn't counting up Africans.

GATES: Did he mean the Irish were in the closest part of the British Isles to Africa?

PAINTER: No. Beddoe was advancing the notion that the Irish belonged to the primitive Celtic race that was, because primitive, therefore dark in color. This came a century after the invention of the term "Caucasian" to refer to White people.

GATES: Invented by Blumenbach?

PAINTER: Yes. In 1795, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach published the third edition of his dissertation, *De generis humani varietate nativa* (*On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*). He didn't use the word 'race' or any word that could easily be translated as 'race'. He was talking about what we might call races, but he used the word 'variety'. The second edition had come out in 1781, and the first edition in 1775. In the first two editions, Blumenbach said there were four human varieties. He was following the great Carolus Linnaeus. In 1795 Blumenbach added a new variety, Malay, in honor of the South Seas exposition. And in that edition he called Europeans Caucasians, and that's where I started my investigation. In the late 1990s, in the moment when Chechnya—the Caucasus—was going up in flames, I thought, "Why are White people called Caucasian? Why name a group of people after so troublesome a place?" So that's where I started.

GATES: When we investigated Queen Noor's family tree, we found some incredible documents. Queen Noor is descended on her father's side from Syrians. Her great-grandfather and her grandfather came to this country in the 1890s, and we have the actual letters that they wrote proving that they were Caucasoid, and therefore White.

PAINTER: Well, they needed to be White to naturalize.

GATES: Could you explain that, because this is something most people don't understand. It's one time in history when Black people were ahead of White people. But please explain why Black people could be naturalized as Americans, but Syrians had to prove they were White.

PAINTER: I think there are many times when Blackness has its advantages, but they don't happen in law very often. We live our lives as raced people in many different sites. Law is one of them, or politics, or citizenship. And that's what we're talking about here. One of the first important laws in the United States was the Naturalization Law of 1790. And that law inserted 'White' into the American legal tradition by saying that if you wanted to naturalize, you had to be White. That held until Reconstruction after the Civil War—until the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868—which said that you could either be White or Black, that is, Negro.

GATES: Or of African descent.

PAINTER: Yes. So that gave you two choices, which left Asians out and left people in the Middle East in a kind of limbo. So I suppose they could have said, "Well, we'll just naturalize as Black." I don't know what that would have meant in legal terms.

GATES: Right. [*Laughter*]

PAINTER: But they wanted to naturalize as White. So they had to go to court. That was the usual way of trying to prove that you were White. This great corpus of law—of people trying to prove they were White—really gives the lie to the idea that somebody could look at somebody and say, "Oh that person is Black or White."

GATES: Absolutely, and that didn't change for what we would call Yellow and Brown people until the McCarran Act of 1950.

PAINTER: The McCarran Act, and then the Immigration Act in 1965.

GATES: That's when Japanese and Chinese people could immigrate to the United States with relative freedom—

PAINTER: And they could naturalize, yes. Before then, the Chinese Exclusion Act had barred the immigration of working-class Asians and declared them ineligible for citizenship.

GATES: For all this time, they were just in between. If their kids were born here, they were Americans.

PAINTER: If born in the United States, they were citizens, yes.

GATES: Now, it's one thing to say that people are White, but it's another thing for Whiteness to become the sign of superiority.

PAINTER: Yes. People have been able to see human difference forever, but to call it race and make race into various rank orders considered permanent—that occurred less than four hundred years ago.

GATES: When did that happen?

PAINTER: That happened with the Enlightenment and Enlightenment science. Science is part of the reason for the invention of the concept of race, even though it was clear for the ancient Greeks that if they looked North, they could see people who were pale.

GATES: Whiter than they were.

PAINTER: Perhaps. They didn't comment on relative lightness. They were not thinking in those terms, and relative skin color wasn't important. What was important was how people lived. The Northerners were barbarians, as opposed to civilized Greeks. And I know that they noticed the color of the skin because at one point, Herodotus is talking about the Scythians, talking about the warriors, and how the warriors will skin somebody they have killed. Then they would make a quiver out of the arm, and it makes a very nice quiver because the arm of a man is very white and showy. But this was not to say, "Oh this is wonderful," or "This is so beautiful," or anything like that. It's just a description of a quiver, mind you.

GATES: Yes, neutral. Like saying you have café-au-lait skin; meaning it's just a color.

PAINTER: Well, even café-au-lait is still inserted in the discussion of race. But yes, it's like saying "what color shall we paint this wall? Shall we make it sort of a warmish off-white? Or shall we make it a bold color?" That sort of thing. It doesn't have the weight of history and of discrimination particularly.

GATES: Right.

PAINTER: So with exploration, with the move of the cultivation of sugar from the eastern Mediterranean into the Caribbean, with the importation of an unfree workforce from Africa as opposed to one from the Black Sea—with all these changes, we get into the racialized world that we know now. Before that, the great term of difference was religion.

GATES: So if I understand you correctly, you are saying that the devil in the machine was economics?

PAINTER: That's a lot of it. It is not all there is to it, but it's a lot of it. As I say in my book, the reason we have stigma by race is to say there is something inside of them, of me, of you, that is permanent, intrinsic, and biological. And that is why the people who do the hard work for little or no pay, why they are down at the bottom. That is why they have to do the dirty work while we sit around with our feet up. And that is why they are going to have to be there for all time. They deserve it.

GATES: They deserve to be slaves, because God made them that way.

PAINTER: God made them that way, and their inherent nature will keep them that way—forever.

GATES: And if we substitute IQ test results, and we say, this is genetic—

PAINTER: We would find the same thing.

GATES: And we will save all these billions of dollars with Head Start programs, or compensatory education, because you can't change what God did.

PAINTER: Right. I will tell you something I have discovered that I didn't know before. The reasoning that you just encapsulated is the reasoning that was applied to Black people in the twentieth century, but it goes back to the eugenics moment when it was poor White families who were seen this way. This reasoning was why they should be sterilized, whether they liked it or not, because charity for them was a waste of money.

GATES: The same arguments obtained between the British settlers and the Irish Catholics, of course.

PAINTER: Yes.

GATES: Could you explain how the ancients attributed traits to climate?

PAINTER: Yes, that makes a lot of sense. When we think about skin color, it is related to climate in the sense that it's related to ultraviolet radiation. The ancients didn't talk about ultraviolet radiation. But they did realize that whether you lived in a boggy place, or a dry place, or a hilly place, or a low place, it would have some kind of influence on what you looked like. They realized that where people lived had a relationship to how they lived. They were more interested in what we might call an anthropological tour of the 'other world' of barbarians. And at bottom, they wanted to prove that first Greece, and then Rome was the best place in the world.

GATES: And the closer to the equator you got, the more primitive you became? Or how did it work?

PAINTER: Well, I'm not sure. But certainly I didn't come across this idea in my research. I was looking north from Greece, and there they found Scythians and Celts, and then they found Gauls and Germans.

GATES: When I was a student at Yale in 1969, there were huge debates in Black Studies courses about whether, when the first White man saw the first Black man, there was this primal xenophobia. Or whether racism was a product of economics and experiencing the need to justify. What's your take on that?

PAINTER: Oh, clearly the second. I'm not saying that people didn't notice human difference. They did. But to categorize people and make taxonomies, and rank them, and call them whatever it is they got called, and say that they were like that forever, and they couldn't be anything else—that is a creature of power relations.

GATES: Absolutely. And "The Dark Side of the Enlightenment" (the title of something I once wrote) is the racialization of human beings and the denigration of Black people in the great chain of beings. Without a doubt.

PAINTER: Yes, yes.

GATES: Who was White in the United States in 1800? And had that changed by 1900?

PAINTER: Well, in terms of politics, it was adult men who could claim European ancestry. But that was only one part of life. By 1850, when we began to see large numbers of impoverished Irish immigrants, then the question was not whether they were White or not. Clearly they were White. Adult Irishmen could vote, and they did. That was part of the bill against them actually, that they voted wrong. But they could vote. So for political purposes, there was no doubt whether or not they were White. Similarly, for the people who were called 'alien races' in the early

twentieth century—the Jewish race, the Italian race, the Slavic race—there was no question that they were White. If they naturalized and, before 1920, were men, they could vote. But that was only the beginning. So after that they could still be racialized, and still be considered a menace, or a problem, or people who should no longer be allowed to immigrate.

GATES: How has a White identity served political purposes in the United States?

PAINTER: Where shall I begin? [*Laughter*] It has been the cornerstone of legal citizenship, and of a kind of emotional citizenship like a sense of owning the country. One thing that surprised me in working on this book was how late African Americans really appear in the wide arena of American political life. This is partly because the South was considered this other thing over there, not really a full part of what was American, and White Southerners, particularly poor White Southerners were almost as much written off as Black Southerners—with Black Southerners being the most written off because of being disenfranchised. But there was this “the South is over there” attitude. And Black people are “over there,” and Southerners are “over there.” And poor White Southerners are “over there,” and they are not part of America. So even though those people could vote, and they were very, very powerful on the federal level, they were not considered part of what made America great. There was always a kind of shoving them aside, and then saying, “Oh well, we don’t mean the South.” I’m thinking about Alexis de Tocqueville actually, his sense of *The American* who is ambitious, entrepreneurial, full of progress, certainly free—and he’s a New Englander. When Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont went south, they almost tore their hair out. They were appalled, and Tocqueville makes a very clear distinction between Ohio, the home of American progress, and Kentucky, the home of slave-holding retrogression.

GATES: When and why did Anglo Saxons become the most privileged of the White people?

PAINTER: This happened when the impoverished Irish came to America in large numbers. The whole hymn to the Saxon, or the Anglo Saxon, existed before Emerson. But Ralph Waldo Emerson gave it a very eloquent voice. Emerson made the American a Saxon, an Englishman. It was a way of separating White Americans into who was to be an American, who was an Englishman, who was Teutonic, and therefore a Saxon. When Emerson said Saxon, he didn’t mean Saxony in Germany, like Dresden and Leipzig, and even Weimar, and Goethe, and Schiller. He didn’t mean *that* Saxony. He meant the Saxony somewhere between the Netherlands and Denmark. And there are some funny quotes about how great the Saxons are, meaning the English people at the time when the English kings were actually Saxons. And how awful the Germans were, of course.

GATES: Right.

PAINTER: “How could King George III put down the colonists in this terrible way? And in our (English) Anglo Saxon sense of rights, we’ll rise up and smite him.” It’s gobbley gook in many, many ways.

GATES: So it seems that your recurring thesis and conclusion is that race and power inextricably intertwine.

PAINTER: Absolutely. And I would add beauty.

GATES: Beauty, of course. Do you see the definition of Whiteness as expanding or shrinking throughout the twenty-first century in this country?

PAINTER: Now that’s a really good question, because in a sense it is doing both. I’m not talking about legal distinctions which are notoriously vague. And if you want to check the White box, you can just check the White box, if you feel like it. Nobody is going to come and arrest you. And nobody is going to let you vote or not let you

vote according to what box you check. So in one sense Whiteness is expanding by letting people in, by opening the privileges that used to be preserved for Whiteness to people who are Brown as long as they're rich, or beautiful, or cute, or something like that. That doesn't touch the Black poor, whom I think will always be racialized. At the same time, I would say also that the importance of Whiteness is also diminished in many ways. You and I are old enough to remember movies like *Pinky*, or *Imitation of Life*, in which a White actress plays a woman who is discovered to have one drop of 'Black' blood. And one drop of bad blood just ruins her life. That sort of thing, I think, doesn't happen anymore. And in that sense, Whiteness is shrinking and, I would say, losing salience. So, for instance, some of the descendants of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson who discovered they had one drop of Black blood said, "Wow, that's interesting."

GATES: Well, in the thousands of letters I have received in response to my series *Faces of America*, many people remark that it is quite profound to see White people like Meryl Streep saying, "I'm so sorry I don't have any measurable African ancestry." Go back fifty years, and nobody was saying that.

PAINTER: Yes, exactly.

GATES: So how does the mixed-race movement enter into this formula—in terms of shrinking Whiteness or expanding Whiteness?

PAINTER: I think this movement is enlarging it. Well, it's enlarging and shrinking it in the ways I spoke of. For mixed-race people, as you know, part of race is attitude as well. If mixed-race people have White mothers, they sometimes get socialized as White people. So they're a little Brown, that's OK. In that sense, 'Whiteness' is getting bigger. But in the other sense, you don't have to be whitey, whitey, White anymore to move with power, wealth, and self-assurance—the traditional hallmarks of Whiteness.

GATES: Right. Do you think that we should be worried as Black people? I gave a lecture at a university recently and a woman who was a well-known politician came up to me and said, "Dr. Gates, we would like you to sign this petition against the mixed-race movement, because it's the enemy of our people. We're losing allocations and appropriations that are tied to the Census." I said, "Well, my two children are half White. According to geneticists, I'm fifty-eight percent White." I always sign African American, of course.

PAINTER: Yes. That reminds me of the early twentieth century—you know, trying to hold back the tide. One of my scholars, William Z. Ripley, was frightened in 1908 by the prospect of an 'inharmonious' mixing of Italian men and Irish women. He thought that was going to make Americans ugly.

GATES: I grew up in an Irish-Italian paper mill town. We call that an interracial marriage. [*Laughter*]

PAINTER: Well, that's what Ripley called it too.

GATES: What can we do to fight the legacy and stigma of racism? I mean you've lived for years thinking about this. No one has shown in more detail, more convincingly than you have, the social construction of Whiteness. It's just as arbitrary, just as subjective, as the social construction of Blackness. It's a brilliant book.

PAINTER: Thank you.

GATES: But, finally, for those of us who love freedom and democracy, how would you encourage the readers of the *Du Bois Review* to combat racism in our society?

PAINTER: I think combating racism in the political sense is a different undertaking from knowing something. But I think knowing about the constructive nature of Whiteness is a kind of emancipation that might give people a little more confidence in attacking racism—to see very clearly how shaky its intellectual basis is.

GATES: Thank you so much, Nell Painter.

PAINTER: Thank you.

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Corresponding author: Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Studies, 104 Mount Auburn Street, 3R, Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: gates@harvard.edu