

RACE - The Power of an Illusion **For Immediate Release (2003)**

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Groundbreaking Three-Part Series Produced and Distributed by California Newsreel Reveals How the Myth of Race Took Hold and Retains Its Power

(San Francisco, CA) - What if we suddenly discovered that our most basic assumption about race - for instance, that the world's people can be divided biologically along racial lines - was false? And if race is a biological "myth," where did the idea come from? How do our institutions give race social meaning and power by advantaging white people?

These are just a few of the questions raised by *Race - The Power of an Illusion*, California Newsreel's provocative new PBS series produced in association with ITVS. It is the first documentary series to scrutinize the very idea of race through the distinct lenses of science, history and our social institutions. The series is narrated by CCH Pounder (*The Shield*). By asking, "What is this thing called 'race'?" a question so basic it is rarely raised, *Race - The Power of an Illusion* challenges some of our most deeply held beliefs.

Ethnic cleansing, affirmative action battles, immigration restrictions - all place race at center stage in contemporary life. Race is so fundamental to discussions of poverty, education, crime, music, and sports that, whether we are racist or anti-racist, we rarely question its reality.

Yet recent scientific evidence suggests that the idea of race is a biological myth, as outdated as the widely held medieval belief that the sun revolved around the earth. Anthropologists, biologists and geneticists have increasingly found that, biologically speaking; there is no such thing as "race." Modern science is decoding the genetic puzzle of DNA and human variation - and finding that skin color really is only skin deep.

However invalid race is biologically, it has been deeply woven into the fabric of American life. *Race - The Power of an Illusion* examines why and how in three one-hour installments. **Episode 1: "The Difference Between Us,"** surveys the scientific findings - including genetics - that suggest that the concept of race has no biological basis. **Episode 2: "The Story We Tell,"** provides the historical context for race in North America, including when and how the idea got started and why it took such a hold over our minds. **Episode 3: "The House We Live In,"** spotlights how our social institutions "make" race by providing different groups vastly different life chances even today, 40 years after the Civil Rights Act.

Episode 1: "The Difference Between Us"

To all intents and purposes Roxanna was as white as anybody, but the 1/16 of her that was black outvoted the other 15 parts and made her a Negro. She was a slave and saleable as such. Her child was 31 parts white and he too was a slave, and by a fiction of law and custom, a Negro.

- Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson

Everyone can tell a Nubian from a Norwegian, so why not divide people into different races? That's the question explored in **"The Difference Between Us,"** which demonstrates how recent scientific discoveries have toppled our common-sense assumption that the world's peoples come bundled into separate groups. It begins by following a dozen students, including black athletes and Asian string players, who sequence and compare their own DNA. The results surprise the students and the viewer,

when they discover their closest genetic matches are as likely to be with people from other "races" as their own.

Much of the program is devoted to discovering why. It examines several discoveries that illustrate why humans cannot be subdivided into races, and reveals that there are no characteristics, no traits - not even one gene - that distinguish all members of one "race" from all members of another.

Humans are among the most similar of all species. That's because modern humans, all of us, evolved in Africa, and began leaving only about 70,000 years ago. As we migrated across the globe, populations bumped into one another, mixing their mates - and genes. Populations have just not been isolated long enough to evolve into separate races, or sub-species.

In a "walk" from the equator to the North, we can see how visual characteristics vary gradually and continuously between populations. There are no boundaries.

We also learn that most traits - be they skin color or hair texture or blood group - are influenced by separate genes and thus inherited independently one from the other. Having one trait does not necessarily imply the existence of others. Skin color really is only skin deep.

Many of the variants in our visual characteristics, like different skin colors, appear to have evolved recently, after we left Africa. But the traits we care most about -- intelligence, musical ability, physical aptitude -- are old, and common to all populations. Geneticists have discovered that 85% of all genetic variants can be found within any local population, be they Poles or Hmong or Fulani. It turns out racial profiling is as inaccurate on the genetic level as it is on the New Jersey Turnpike.

Certainly some gene forms are found in greater frequency in some populations than others, such as the gene variants governing skin color, and for some diseases, like Tay Sachs and sickle cell. But are these markers of "race"? The mutation that causes sickle cell, we learn, was selected because it conferred resistance to malaria. It is found among people whose ancestors came from parts of the world where malaria was common - central and West Africa, Turkey, Arabia, India, Greece, and Sicily, but not southern Africa.

Yet we have a long history of searching for innate "racial" differences to explain differential group outcomes, be it disease, SAT scores, or athletic performance. In contrast to today's myth of innate black athletic superiority, one hundred years ago many whites felt that high African American disease and mortality rates were caused not by poverty, poor sanitation, and Jim Crow but because black people were inherently infirm and destined to die out. When influential Prudential Insurance Company statistician Frederick Hoffman compared death and disease rates between white and black people in 1896, he attributed the disparities to a "heritable race trait" among Negroes, ignoring the impact of poverty, poor sanitation, and over-crowding on health and mortality.

Today, it is still popular to attribute group differences in performance to innate "racial" traits. In **"The Difference Between Us,"** many of our common myths about race - such as the "natural" advantages of black athletes, or the musical abilities of Asians - are taken apart.

Episode 2: "The Story We Tell"

All is race; there is no other truth.
- Benjamin Disraeli

But it's true that race has always been with us, right? Wrong. Ancient peoples stigmatized "others" on the grounds of language, custom, class, and especially religion, but they did not sort people into races.

"The Story We Tell" traces the origins of the racial idea to the European conquest of the Americas and to the American slave system, the first ever where all the slaves shared a physical trait: dark skin.

James Horton, Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies and History at George Washington University, explains it this way: "They found what they considered an endless labor supply. People who could be readily identified and so when they ran away they couldn't melt into the population like Native Americans could. People who knew how to grow tobacco, people who knew how to grow rice. They found the ideal, from their standpoint, the ideal labor source."

Ironically, it was not slavery but freedom - the revolutionary new idea of liberty and the natural rights of man - that led to the ideology of white supremacy.

Robin Kelley, Chair of the History Department at New York University, raises the conundrum haunting our Founders: "The problem that they had to figure out is how can we promote liberty, freedom, democracy on the one hand, and a system of slavery and exploitation of people who are non-white on the other?"

James Horton illuminates the story that helped reconcile that contradiction: "And the way you do that is to say, 'Yeah, but you know there is something different about these people. This whole business of inalienable rights, that's fine, but it only applies to certain people.'" It was not a coincidence that Thomas Jefferson, the apostle of freedom and a slaveholder, was the first American public figure to articulate a theory speculating upon the "natural" inferiority of Africans.

Similar logic rationalized the taking of Indian lands. When the "civilized" Cherokee were forcibly removed from their homes in Georgia to west of the Mississippi in 1838, one in four died in what became known as "The Trail of Tears." President Andrew Jackson defended Indian removal. It wasn't greed causing the Indians to "disappear," but the inevitable fate of an inferior people established "in the midst of a superior race."

By mid-19th century, with the help of new "scientific" studies, racial difference had become the accepted "common-sense" wisdom of white America. Race explained everything from individual behavior to the fate of human societies. It conveniently justified manifest destiny and American annexation of the Philippines. In the new monthly magazines of the late 19th century and at the remarkable indigenous people's displays at the 1904 World's Fair celebrating the centennial of Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase, we can see how American popular culture reinforced racial explanations for American progress and power, imprinting ideas of racial difference and white superiority deeply into our minds. **"The Story We Tell"** is an eye-opening tale of how deep and enduring social inequalities came to be rationalized as natural, reflecting not our social practices and public policies but nature's way.

Episode 3: "The House We Live In"

"Virginia law defined a Black person as a person with 1/16th African ancestry. Florida defined a black person as a person with 1/8th African ancestry. Alabama said, 'You are Black if you got any African ancestry at all.' But you know what this means? You can walk across a state line and literally, legally change race. Now what does race mean under those circumstances? You give me the power, I can make you any race I want you to be, because it is a social, political construction."

*- James Horton, Benjamin Banneker Professor of American History,
George Washington University*

But if race doesn't exist biologically, what is it? And should it matter? The final episode, "The House We Live In," is the first film on race to focus not on individual attitudes and behavior but on how our

institutions leave different groups differently advantaged. Its subject is the "unmarked" race, white people. The shows makes visible the benefits that quietly and often invisibly accrue to white people, not always because of merit or hard work, but because our laws, courts, customs, and perhaps most pertinently, segregated neighborhoods, racialize opportunity.

The film begins by looking at the massive immigration from eastern and southern Europe early in the 20th century. Italians, Hebrews, Greeks and other ethnics were considered by many as separate races. Their "whiteness" had to be won. But who was "white?" The 1790 Naturalization Act had limited naturalized citizenship to "free, white persons." In 1915, Takeo Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant who had attended the University of California, appealed the rejection of his citizenship application. He argued that his skin was as white as any "white" person. But he also argued that race shouldn't matter - what mattered most was one's beliefs. The Supreme Court ruled against him, saying that Ozawa may be white but he was not Caucasian, and according to scientific evidence only Caucasians could be white people.

Several months later, Bhagat Singh Thind, a South Asian immigrant and U.S. Army veteran, argued that he should be granted citizenship since scientists classified Indians as caucasians. The Court, refuting its own reasoning in Ozawa said Thind may well be caucasian but he wasn't "white." Petition denied.

After WWII, all-white suburbs like Levittown popped up around the country, built with the help of new federal policies that directed government guaranteed loans to white homeowners. Real estate practices and Federal Housing Administration regulations (including red-lining, which originated as explicit government policy) kept non-whites out. In moving to these segregated suburbs, Italians, Jews and other European ethnics, once considered "not quite white," blended together and reaped the advantages of whiteness, including the accumulation of equity and wealth as their homes increased in value. Yet those opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility were denied many communities of color. Of the \$120 billion of housing underwritten by the federal government between 1932 and 1964, less than 2% went to non-whites.

Today, the net worth of the average black family is about 1/8 that of the average white family. Much of that net worth derives from the value of the family's residence. As homes get passed from family to family through generation after generation, the real legacy of race is felt. The houses in predominantly white areas sell for much more than those in black, Hispanic or integrated neighborhoods, and so power, wealth, and advantage - or the lack of it - are passed down from parent to child. The starting line for the next generation is drawn at different points on the field. Surprising new studies reveal that the performance gaps in test scores, graduation rates, welfare usage and other measures between white and black people disappear once this "family wealth gap" is taken into account. This is one reason why 'color-blind' policies that pretend race doesn't exist are not the same thing as creating equality. It is why Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun wrote in the Bakke decision, "To get beyond racism we must first take account of race. There is no other way."

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California Newsreel, founded in 1968, is among the country's oldest, non-profit documentary production and distribution centers. *Race - The Power of an Illusion* is available on video for educational use from California Newsreel at www.newsreel.org or toll-free at 877-811-7495. An engaging and content-rich companion web site at <https://racepowerofanillusion.org> allows viewers to explore the science, history and sociology of race in greater detail and provides activities and lesson plans for teachers.

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About ITVS

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