Ways & Means Transcript—S2E2—Who is White?

Emily Hanford (EH): From Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy, this is Ways and Means. We spotlight bright ideas for how to improve human society. I'm Emily Hanford.

Donald Trump (DT): Build that wall, we're gonna build that wall. Don't worry about it. We're gonna build that wall.

EH: At this Trump rally in Las Vegas earlier this year, the hall was overflowing with a boisterous crowd that was overwhelmingly white, and then there was Pilar Marrero, a journalist who was born in Venezuela.

Crowd: Build that wall! Build that wall!

Pilar Marrero (PM): I wanted to see it up close, but I didn't wanna sit with the press and I didn't wanna be very obvious about the fact that I was media, because I wanted just to observe people up close.

EH: Pilar is Senior Political Correspondent for the Spanish-language newspaper "La Opinión" in Los Angeles. She left her press credentials behind, and walked out on the convention center floor, where the rally was being held. It was kind of like going undercover.

PM: They were just sharing very freely, you know, "Oh, you know, I think he needs to put up a wall at the border" and, you know, "We're being overrun but all these illegals." And they were sharing like they would with a friend or someone was sharing their own their own ideas. Obviously, I was mistaken for a Trump enthusiast.

EH: With her blonde hair and green eyes Pilar can easily pass for white. She came to the United States from Venezuela 30 years ago.

PM: If I had been dark-skinned, like brown or black, I don't think I would have felt comfortable sitting there. Obviously, there were a vast majority of people there were white- there were some minorities, but they were very few and far in-between. And so, I kind of felt more secure by just being there and pretending to be white.

EH: It's not the first time she's felt this way.

PM: People don't know quite where to put me. The way I look- light-skinned, green eyes, and lighter hair- makes them think I am an Anglo-American, right, a white person; but then, I speak, and I have an accent or I speak Spanish, I started speaking Spanish and they go "What?!"

EH: Pilar doesn't fit neatly into the racial categories in many people's minds, and so people often assume she's white. But, assigning people to racial categories it's something Americans do all the time, often without thinking. We toss around the terms "Black", "Hispanic", and "White", as if we all agree on what they mean. Yet a look at history shows that ideas about our nation's racial categories- what they are and who fits into them- are always changing. And in particular, the answer to the question "Who is white?" has never been simple.

Gunther Peck (GP): If you listen to today's rhetoric, you would think, "Well, anyone with light skin is white." Even though we're all shades of brown.

EH: That's Duke historian Gunther Peck. He's writing a book about the history of whiteness in America.

GP: White people as a category has had a strange and circuitous history. The people who are white today were not white yesterday. So, for example, in the early 20th century, most of the new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were not considered white.

EH: That's people from Italy, Greece, Bulgaria.

GP: The weirdest one who wasn't white were Finns.

EH: Fins, people from Finland. Not so very long ago, the blond, blue-eyed Finns who some people might consider the epitome of whiteness, they were actually not considered white. Coming up on this episode of Ways and Means: shifting ideas about who is
considered white in America. How it's changed, what it means, and how it may be
changing still.

Male Narrator (MN): The coming of the Finns has rocked the Northwoods country. He is today what the red man was two centuries ago: the exotic stranger from another world.

EH: This is the introduction to a 1952 book about the folktales of Finnish-Americans, written by a professor at the University of Michigan.

MN: In many ways, the popular myths surrounding the Indian and the Finn run parallel, both derived from a shadowy Mongolian stock. Just look at their raised cheekbones and slanting eyes.

EH: Hmm, not seeing it.

MN: Both possess supernatural stamina, strength, and tenacity.

EH: Believe it or not, this book was published by the Harvard University Press.

GP: And, why, might you ask, would Finnish immigrants not be considered white, blond
as they many of them are? Well this case, in the early 20th century census-takers were told not to record Finnish immigrants as white because they were socialists. They were the most politically-radical immigrant group ever to migrate to the United States. They were, almost all of them fleeing certain types of political persecution and they were politically far, far to the left.

EH: At the turn of the 20th century, as immigrants poured into Ellis Island and other ports of entry, census workers ticked off boxes that assigned new immigrants to different racial categories. In the case of the Finns-

GP: The census-takers, when they're marking ethnicity off the boat at Ellis Island, listed them as not white. It was actual, sort of, census-taker protocol. Census takers-were trying to lower them, they were trying to group them with the southern Eastern Europeans that they were coming in to the country with.

EH: And the Finns weren't alone. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, many immigrants- Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, Bulgarians- they were all classified as non-white.

GP: So, the category of white people has changed dramatically over time. Today's white people were not yesterday's white people and the reason the category is changed is because the actual color of white people's skin is not the basis for what white racial identity has been.

EH: In fact, Gunther Peck, the Duke historian, says the very idea that humanity can be divided into races based on skin color- that idea is a fairly modern idea. For instance, back in the day, British nobles would never have said they were members of the white race.

GP: They used race in a different way in the late 17th century. To be a member of a race was to be part of a family, an aristocratic line. So, you might be part of the Tudor or the Stuart race, or the Annesley race. These are different noble families. So, race was not so much about skin color it was about nobility, noble genes.

EH: Some of the earliest uses of the phrase "white people" in US history are in descriptions of indentured servants. Gunther says, "Landowners wanted to distinguish their white servants from their black slaves."

GP: Because the greatest fear in the early 18th century is actually, and you see this in the descriptions of protests and rebellion, is that whites and blacks will combine. And, so it's partly to divide servants and slaves that the language of "white", "lights" comes into being.

EH: Even in the early 20th century, the word "race" was used very differently than it is today.

GP: You'd be a member of the Finnish race, you'd be a member of the Hungarian race, of the Jewish race, and so you had hundreds of races. This is where scientific eugenicist thinking became so powerful.

EH: Social scientists at prestigious universities devised a hierarchy- now thoroughly debunked- to rank different national races.

GP: Social scientists measure the slopes of people's foreheads to try to ascertain intelligence.

EH: That's where the term "highbrow" comes from.

GP: It is horrible social science, but nonetheless was very successful and powerful in creating, you know, a single hierarchy of all peoples.

EH: To repeat, these deeply racist ideas have been thoroughly disproved, yet they continue to cast a dark shadow over contemporary American life. Some immigrant groups who were officially considered white still faced racial discrimination. The Irish, for instance- in the eyes of the law and immigration authorities in the 19th century, Irish immigrants were considered white, but that's not how they were viewed by many people it was common to see signs that said, "Irish need not apply" and worse. Here's historian Gunther Peck again.

GP: There's a classic example of this in a political cartoon right after emancipation in the 1860's. Thomas Nast is the cartoonist. It shows on the one hand the scales of justice; and the left hand there's a picture of an African American freedman, the newest citizen, who looks, sort of, unfit for democracy; and on the other scale- they're being equated as being equally unfit- is the picture of the "Irish citizen", so-called, and he's portrayed exactly like an ape and they're equal, they're equally unfit for democracy according to this cartoonist.

EH: Some Irish activists pushed for alliances between Irish workers and African-Americans.

GP: So, then the question becomes, "Well, what will the Irish do? Will the Irish find common cause with African-Americans, or will they treat them with racism?" That question was at the heart of a lot of the drama of the 19th century.

EH: In the end, most Irish Americans followed the path of so many other immigrant groups; they merged into the American melting pot. In a generations time, they went from being victims of racial prejudice to being seen as white.

Barack Obama (BO): This is not to say that race has not been an issue in this campaign. At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either too black or not black enough.

EH: When Barack Obama was elected president, it was a racial milestone for the country. Obama was celebrated by many as America's first Black president, but he is also the country's first biracial president. That fact wasn't lost on Sarah Gaither. Sarah's a psychologist who teaches at Duke. After closely following Obama's election in 2008, she wondered what effect his re-election might have on racial attitudes. So, she surveyed people, black and white, just before and after the 2012 election and she asked them to describe Obama's race.

Sarah Gaither (SG): Before the election, whites didn't think he was very white, and blacks didn't think he was very black, but two weeks after his reelection we found that White's then thought he was very white and blacks then thought he was very black.

EH: Nothing actually changed about Obama's identity in less than a month, of course; yet people's perceptions about his race shifted.

SG: And so, what we call this in social psychology is something known as "BIRGing" or basking in reflected glory. So, when someone from your team wins, you tend to want to claim that team member a lot more strongly than when that team member loses, and so that's sort of the effect we found regarding race in that election and we're hoping to measure similar things regarding gender in this upcoming election.

EH: Sarah has experienced shifting racial perceptions firsthand. Her mother is white, and her father is black. Like Pilar Marrero, the journalist we heard from earlier, Sarah is often mistaken for white. In fact, she's often challenged to prove her racial identity, so she carries around a family photo that shows her white mother, her black father, and her brother. Her brother looks more like her dad.

SG: So, he has an African nose, he has black lips- broader lips- so he looks much more mixed than I do. He gets mis-categorized as being black very often. I never really get that experience. He's been pulled over for driving while black, he's been followed around stores for looking black.

EH: Sarah has also seen what happens when people think she's white, only to learn that she's biracial.

SG: There are those white people who learn that I'm half black and then they're more nervous and talking to me about diversity issues. They become confused about where I stand on things like affirmative action, for some reason, just by this simple switch and a label that's been applied to myself.

EH: Being biracial gives Sarah a different window on whiteness in America and blackness, too.

SG: I definitely think across my entire life I've had a number of privileges in being able to pass as white. I'll never be followed in stores, I'll never be pulled over by cops- these kinds of experiences just won't happen to me.

EH: Being biracial has led Sarah to study cross-racial communication and cross-racial perception. One thing that helps, she found, is simple exposure. For instance, she looked at what happens when white college students room with students of another race.

SG: At the end of students' first years, those white students who were living with someone who was not white- so either Asian, Black, or Latino, doesn't matter what race- they were able to interact much more positively with a black person they had never met before and they were also able to discuss issues of affirmative action in a much less biased, much more open manner compared to white students who lived with other white students.

EH: "Communication across racial lines- it sounds so simple and non-threatening, yet it's not" says Duke historian Gunther Peck.

GP: When progress has occurred it's because there is an alliance between African-Americans and other groups that have been marginalized, whether they're immigrants, whether there are working-class whites, and, when they have come together, there's been genuine economic progress, political expansion of rights, and kind of inversely, in the opposite, it was when rights have been thoroughly racialized, poor whites lose, African-Americans lose, our democracy is stunted.

EH: Gunther says, "Focusing on racial divisions helps distract from other divisions. As long as Americans are focused on racial differences, we tend to pay less attention to how deeply divided we are when it comes to income."

GP: Martin Luther King, at the end of his life- the very strength of his vision was, this goes back to having poor people coming together, he didn't deny race. He recognized racial differences among people and King was arguing precisely that this poor person's campaign is powerful because it is not just black- it's black, it's poor white, it was in Native Americans, Mexican-Americans all coming together to fight poverty and the strength of that movement was, in part, on how it was using race to say this is how we combat poverty in coalition. And that's the most dangerous political force and progressive political force in U.S. history.

EH: In the past, wave after wave of light-skinned immigrants has moved into the American mainstream, becoming white in the eyes of the law and of society. Journalist Pilar Marrero sees irony there- irony and amnesia.

PM: I was just discussing this recently with a friend of mine who's Mexican-American, about another friend who's Italian-American and she's very anti-Mexican and my friend was telling me and "I don't understand her, because she's Italian and when her ancestors came, they were considered non-white and they were considered problematic because they were Catholics," but now these descendants are just white Anglo-Americans. The more time that passes, I think the less they identify with an immigrant in their past.

EH: For immigrants in the past, becoming white meant joining the majority-white population in America, but census predictions suggest that within 30 years white people will be a minority. Meanwhile, the number of biracial Americans is growing, Americans like
Sarah Gaither. Less is known about how biracial Americans experience race.

SG: Race is a socially-constructed category that we importantly constructed, we have made what white is, we have made what black is, and we're slowly making what biracial is or is not.

EH: Pilar Marrero agrees. She says, "It will be interesting to watch coming generations." In the past, waves of lighter-skinned immigrants, the ones who could, joined the American mainstream by letting go of their ethnic identities. They merged into the famed "American
melting pot: and became white. Now, it seems that white may soon be one racial category among many, and, with that demographic shift, perhaps what it means to be white in
America will change yet again.

PM: Who knows? I mean, what who knows him whiteness will stop being the greatest- this great thing, right? We may not be a melting pot anymore, we may be more of a salad bowl, but there are certain ideas that unite us, right? There are certain aspirations that we all have, and I think that's what continues to make it possible for this country to exist.

EH: Ways and Means is produced by Alison Jones, Carol Jackson, and Karen Kemp. Thank you to Joe Luthor, who provided research help on this episode, and to journalist Pilar Marrero of "La Opinión". Gunther Peck is an associate professor of public policy and an associate professor of history at Duke University. Sarah Gaither is an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke. Thanks to Cabell Smith- he narrated the book section that you heard at the beginning of the show. We get engineering help from Johnny Vince Evans. Katherine M. Zhou creates original art for each episode. We're a production of the Stanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Thank you for listening. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr (MLK): And the final analysis- God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men, but God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and the creation of a society where all men will live together with his brothers and every man will respect the dignity and the worth of human
personality.