

Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

Shimon Cohen:

I'm excited to let you all know about one of our episode's sponsors, idealist.org, a site for nonprofit and social-impact jobs. So, if you're looking for a job that makes a difference or looking to hire, check out idealist.org. They've got thousands of excellent listings, along with tools to help your organization find the right talent. I know a number of Doin' The Work followers are at organizations looking to hire, and we also have students and professionals in our audience who are looking for the right place to work. If you're a job seeker, remember that idealist.org is always free for you to use. And for hiring organizations, use the code idealist.org/thework to claim your credit for one free 30-day job listing. That's idealist.org/thework.

Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Dr. Deadric Williams, who is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, where he's been since January 2020. We discuss racism, race, and racialization. Dr. Williams explains how the concept of race comes out of racism, and that many people often approach this the other way around, as if race came first. He breaks down how racism is a combination of ideology and structures, such as laws, policies, and social practices that support the hierarchical dominance of people racialized as White, and oppression of people racialized as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Dr. Williams emphasizes that the belief in classifying humans into groups according to race is a racist belief that served, and continues to serve, to justify the oppressive practice of European settler colonialism taking land from Indigenous Peoples and enslaving Africans for labor. We discuss how creating whiteness was a means to split oppressed groups by this new category of race, and the way this functioned –and functions– by providing White people with material and psychology benefits at the expense of Black people. Dr. Williams goes in-depth with how racism and racialization function in the larger society, particularly the coding that is used in place of overt racism, affecting the health and well-being of people and families, and ways to identify the mechanisms of racial inequities in the U.S. We need to have a clear understanding that racism leads to race and this overall process so that we can adequately address it. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about one of our episode's sponsors, the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UH has a phenomenal social work program that offers face-to-face master's and doctorate degrees, as well as an online and hybrid MSW. They offer one of the country's only Political Social Work programs and an Abolitionist Focused Learning Opportunity. Located in the heart of Houston, the program is guided by their bold vision to achieve social, racial, economic, and political justice, local to global. In the classroom and through research, they are committed to challenging systems and

reimagining ways to achieve justice and liberation. Go to www.uh.edu/socialwork to learn more. And now, the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey, Dr. Williams, thank you so much for coming on Doin' The Work. I am so excited to have you on here. I've been following you on Twitter. That's how we connected. I'm really grateful. You responded back and wanted to do this interview that's been a bit in the making. And just to start off, man, you've really blown up on Twitter. I mean, it's wild to see. I think when I started following you, maybe you had a couple of thousand followers, and I just looked, I think yesterday, and it's over 11,000 now. So what you're putting out there is really resonating with people. It's wild.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

I appreciate the invitation to be on the podcast. Thank you for reaching out. I truly, and I really appreciate it. So yeah, part of the Twitter kind of start, man, was really during the pandemic. I couldn't go anywhere. I was reading. I was writing. And to be honest, I think I've been more productive during the pandemic, surprisingly, than I've ever been. And part of that I think is some scholars of color would say that when you're not in these spaces of microaggressions and being othered, you can really let loose in terms of your writing. And that's what happened. And so part of the Twitter, it started off with me just dropping tidbits while I write to try to get a filler... to put a filler out there in the Twitter-verse. And people would respond to me saying, "Hey, you're thinking in the right way," or, "Ah, that's not really clear. Here's some articles you should read. Here's a book you should read." So I was getting "free references" from scholars across the globe without even sending an email.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And then, the second part of me being on Twitter, I think, I started feeling some kind of way, just thinking about my own experience as someone who is racialized as Black, who went to predominantly White institutions. And I remember the feelings that I had of being isolated. That no one gets me. There's no one really to understand my line of reasoning and thinking. And so now that I'm a faculty, I put some tweets out just because I was worried that... Well, the question I was asking myself, "Am I the only person going through this? Am I the only person who have experienced these types of feelings in academia?" As it turns out, I am not.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so part of what I tweet about in terms of inequities, specifically racial inequities, resonates with tons of people. And I think that was a byproduct of my Twitter growth of sorts. And to not minimize my own research because I think some of the research that I've done here of late has really taken off, and I don't know what's the directionality of it all. I don't know if people were following me on Twitter, didn't see my work, or see my work and then followed me on Twitter. And so I don't know. I think it's all happening simultaneously. And as a result of that, my Twitter following has increased as you mentioned, exponentially. So yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, I really appreciate how you break things down. You can take complex concepts about race, racism, racialization, systemic racism, and break it down in the Twitter limit, in a way that's really understandable. And so I am... And then, I went to a talk that you did, an online presentation that was more academic and it was phenomenal. And so I was like, "I got to get him on here."

Shimon Cohen:

And one of the big reasons I wanted to get you on here is the way you are able to talk about these things. And that there is... My own field of social work is a blend of sociology, psychology, public policy. There's so many different aspects that make up social work, and there is a big push, or maybe was, I don't know what's going to happen, it depends on who you talk to, to really... There's some new accreditation standards with anti-racism that are coming out and folks are... People got to really make some changes with how things are being done. But those cannot happen if people don't fully understand what we're talking about with race, racism, racialization. Right?

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Right.

Shimon Cohen:

Because it often is discussed in a way that's just straight-up wrong. Let's just say incorrect. So I wanted to start out with that, just talking about race, racism, racialization, and if you can break down what these terms mean and some ways and how they function.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Yeah, I appreciate that. Yeah. So there's been a few scholars and laypersons, if you will, who have said the same thing. So I really appreciate the love and the recognition that people are showing via Twitter on taking complex issues and using the Twitter word limit, to really paint a clear picture on these types of processes and mechanisms. So just to be...

Dr. Deadric Williams:

A little bit of background about me, in order to make sense of my answers. So I was trained as a family sociologist in quant methods. So I trained at the University of Nebraska PhD program in sociology. And most of my work is about stress and health, kind of conventional work. And I did a postdoc in minority health disparities. And being a postdoc sometimes, you're free to do your own work as well. So I really took a deep dive in critical race scholarship to see, because I was interested in it, but I wasn't in a program that lend itself to that type of training. So you take the training that you get and then you learn skills, you learn how to be a critical reader, critical thinker, and then you can read whatever you want to read. And so that's what I did.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And I was really frustrated about how people were writing about race and racism and racialization. It was all these abstract ideas. I'm like, "No, there has to be a simpler way to talk about it." So what I do? There is a kind of... In order to understand what race is, you have to first understand what racism is. So there is this assumption, kind of conventional wisdom or conventional thinking that race comes first and then racism happens. So race is often taken as a taken-for-granted demographic characteristic of the population like people who are White, Black, Asian, Native, Latino or "Hispanic." It depends on who's doing the survey.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And then, because of those groups, then people can be "racist" or have racist feelings about those groups. And the more I read, I was like, "Wait a minute, our convention is not necessarily accurate." If

we start from the perspective that racism makes the idea of race possible, then it shifts the imagination. It shifts the perspective. It shifts the line of reasoning. Because racism, as I teach it and write about it is composed of two things.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

One, there's an ideological component of racism that is the belief that you can hierarchically order human beings. And then the second component of racism are structures, the laws, policies, social practices, even discourse in language that gives weight to the ideological dimension. So these things are happening simultaneously and reinforcing one another. So if a group of people, let's call them settler colonialists, believe that they are "God's gift to humanity," and they are on top of the human hierarchy and other particular so-called groups are at the bottom of the human hierarchy, that is how we get the notion that races like R-A-C-E-S exist.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

The idea that groups can be hierarchically structured and ordered, and then creating laws, policy, social practices, and discourse and language around that idea gives weight to the idea that humans can be separated based on some set of features, whether that's phenotypical features, hair texture, eye shape, head sizes. And so those things become... So racism, given its ingredients, ideology and structures, actually makes our understanding of race possible. So if we start there, then we can have a more fruitful and meaning conversation about ameliorating or getting rid of racism. And so I'm going to stop right there because I've said a ton. But I want to be sure that we understand that the direction isn't race leads to racism, but rather racism leads to the idea of race. And there's a reason for that. And I can elaborate on that further.

Shimon Cohen:

I mean that's just so clear how you explained it. And I think that's something that for me has been a process as well to come to that like, "Okay, race is a social construct. It's not biological." Which, obviously at one point, they were saying it was biological, and that's been disproven. But even still, it was like, "Oh, people... There were these races, even that construct, and then racism came about." And it's like, "No, there wouldn't be race, races without racism. It's so deeply intertwined, it's so hard to even separate."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right. That's right. But the idea, I think even... So the idea of, "Racism makes race possible," is also about materiality and power. So if settler colonialists are coming to the so-called new world, they need land. They're not just taking resources and heading back to Europe. They're actually staying. In order to stay, you need to remove people who are on the land. And not only that, you need people to work for free to till that land. So when we think about racism makes the idea of race possible, we also have to think about the power that is being able to influence others even against their own will and materiality that is land itself. So if you think... So racism needed to exist, and thus race need to exist to actually justify oppression, domination, and exploitation. So if I can say, "Oh."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

So, let me step back for a second. Remember, in this country, we talk about freedom, liberty, and justice. So the critical question becomes, how can a country that's preaching a metaphorical sermon of

freedom, liberty, and justice, while simultaneously committing genocide and chattel slavery? Well, you can justify it by saying, "These people are not fully human." Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Now, the ideologies and structures, that is the belief that humans can be hierarchically organized and laws and policies that justify that, it becomes clearer, there is a motive. There's a reason that we have these so-called racial groups that's designed to standardize the inequality. So imagine, the inequality was already happening. And so putting race on top of the inequality justifies it. Say, "Oh, well, we tried to reason with these people. We tried to put them in schools but they don't want any of that. So it's their fault that they're less than human."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

"Well, people of African descent are inherently inferior. Their role, their so-called God-given role is to serve, is to be enslaved." So those processes and mechanisms then makes it seem as if race is normal. Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so, when we start there, I think then we can have, again, a more fruitful conversation on how this started, how is it perpetuated, and what we need to do to at least identify the mechanisms to reduce racial inequities in the U.S.

Shimon Cohen:

I think the part you were saying of the oppression was already happening, and my understanding of that, I'm very influenced by the Seeing White series by Scene on Radio and they talked with Nell Irvin Painter and this idea that, they weren't called White, but White indentured servants and enslaved Africans were oppressed. And then these benefits that started to be given to the Europeans started to separate out and create Whiteness. Where at first, it was really a class, like ruling class versus the oppressed, I don't even want to say working class because it was not even necessarily a working class.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Absolutely. That's right. That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

And so, these mechanisms that got built over time with these privileges, which of course, we talked about White privilege, which I think sometimes is a difficult concept for White people to understand. But these were the types of benefits given over time to start splitting apart this bigger... the numbers, and these bribes basically.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right. That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

For people who became White.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And that's an excellent point. Because part of European indentured servants, were also part of the oppressed group. But we see what happens, let's say for example, during Bacon's Rebellion, where indentured servants and enslaved Africans work together to fight against land owners and what we call "masters" because they recognized their solidarity was powerful. Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Because now, they have a common interest. They're being exploited, oppressed, and they saw their commonalities based on that exploitation. Now, when that happened, it really got landowners thinking, "Okay, how can we make sure this don't happen again?" And so what ended up happening to your point, is that laws, and again, the structures, then became hardened. Laws and policies actually fining indentured servants if they're caught fraternizing with enslaved persons.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so it drew a wedge between people who had the same economic conditions. Now, this notion of race becomes increasingly salient to divide and conquer. And so many critical scholars, like myself, never dismissed the notion of class inequality. What we tend to argue is how the notion of race, and racism more specifically, drives... It can convolute this notion of economic exploitation. And so we see, even in contemporary America, that people racialized as White, who are economically poor, often vote against their class-based interests for their racial interests. And that happened a long time ago. And so for that to still be salient to people in their minds, and I'm talking freely here, but let's not forget that Du Bois talked about this in the Black Reconstruction book. He's asking the question, during the Reconstruction era, post-slavery, "Why don't former enslaved persons and poor European indentured servants team up?" Well, part of that, what he calls the "psychological wages of Whiteness." Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That, "I may be economically poor, but at least I'm not Black."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so the notion of race became salient because it offered somewhat of a material, but a huge psychological benefit for persons who are economically poor and of European descent. So our understanding of race at that moment became a way to divide and conquer. And what critical scholars, including myself, is really trying to get us to understand is that process, if we just look at a class-based

process only, it assumes that if people who are racialized as Black get these material benefits, they'll have better outcomes. Well, we know empirically that's not the case.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Second, it assumes that people racialized as White understand their economic plight. And again, empirical evidence suggests that's not the case. It's much more nuanced than that. And so critical scholars are saying, "No, racism helps us to understand class-based inequalities because of how we understand ourselves so to speak in a racialized structure." So I'm going to stop there because now, I'm going out in the deep end.

Shimon Cohen:

No, I mean, when I learned that White communities closed public swimming pools because they didn't want to swim with Black people. And so, who lost access to the pool? Well, the White people who could no longer afford... who couldn't afford a private club.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Right. Right.

Shimon Cohen:

Right. So, White people were willing to say, "Well, no one's going to get to swim except those of us who can now pay privately for it."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right. That's right. And that's what I think critical scholars is really trying to demonstrate that how powerful this notion of separation based on the set of phenotypical features, how that literally hurts people. Not only what we call "people of color" but also people racialized as White who are economically poor. Racism hurts them too. And if we're not careful, then this particular set of inequities maintains itself. "History repeats itself over and over again."

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, absolutely. So one thing... Another thing, I mean I have a lot of things I want to talk to you about. But one thing that always comes up when talking about racism is that it's this interpersonal issue. And this also overlaps with this idea of implicit bias or unconscious bias because by making it into this individual interpersonal issue, it means we all have it. And so it almost equalizes racism in a way of like, "Me as a White man, I can have implicit bias towards you as a Black man, but you as a Black man could have it back towards me."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Right. Right.

Shimon Cohen:

So it takes the power dynamics and all that right out of it.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right. And one of my critiques of that notion. There is this... So how I often teach and have conversations about racism, this kind of interpersonal versus structural. If we can reduce racism to this interpersonal thing, then I can free myself up and say, "Well, I know those bad apples. Those racist people over there. But I'm not one of them." But what happens is that it takes the metaphorical stinger out of the bumblebee because it says that, "Oh... it just depends on who you are. You have to have an intentional, egregious act of sorts against some other 'racial group' to be racist."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Well, from a structural sense, intentionality is not a necessary condition for the maintenance of racial inequities. You don't have to be intentional. It's sufficient, but not necessary. Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so what happens in these particular moments is that we want to blame someone else. No. And the same thing could be said about patriarchy and class-based inequities. It's not necessarily somebody's sitting behind a chair saying, "Oh, let's oppress the Black people." No. Because it's so ingrained. We don't need that. All we need is taking for granted assumptions that the world is race-neutral. Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Right.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so for people racialized as Black... So I try to help students to understand how racial oppression works. For the sake of the example, let's start with chattel slavery, the idea that people are chattel slaved because they're less than human. Well, if that was the case, only, then the end of slavery should have resolved it all if it was just about that. If you justified a person's chattel enslavement because they are not "human" and come to find out, "Uh, that's not necessarily true," and, "Let's free these folks," for lack of words.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

But that didn't happen. Because it's so ingrained, the idea that humans are a part of a larger hierarchy, that there's somebody at the top and somebody at the bottom, the system that is the ideologies, laws, and policies do not know how to maintain equality. The system only knows inequality. So after chattel enslavement, Jim Crow laws come to adjust for the potential equity. So you no longer have enslaved persons. But now, you need something else to justify the racist ideology. And Bonilla-Silva talks about this and other scholars, who talks about the history of this country about correcting itself. So if the stability of the U.S. is inequality, anytime challenges from the "inferior group" kind of challenges the "superior group," you see this possibility for equality. But the system doesn't like... It can't function that way. At least it perceives itself not to be able to function in that way.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

You have adjustments. So, Jim Crow laws is an adjustment for slavery. And even when you talk about the civil rights movement, trying to challenge Jim Crow laws, what we get is a neoliberal expression of race neutrality in response. So civil rights legislation, everybody's equal now. So, it's transitioning from slavery to Jim Crow, from Jim Crow to a post-civil rights era that has never been legislation to remedy the preexisting racial inequities. All they said is, "You can't do that anymore." And when you do that, new mechanisms emerge. New techniques and tactics emerge to maintain the system of inequities. Again, a system born out of inequities doesn't know how to create equity. And I think that's so challenging for many of us who study inequalities, even gender inequities or class inequities. We're all saying the same thing, but placing emphasis in different places. And so part of what might work, and my teaching is trying to do is to expose that. To give people an idea that is not as "race-neutral" as we would hope to believe.

Shimon Cohen:

And that perfectly leads into this other question I had for you or just more like a comment. So it's like we talk about race as a social construct, and if you probably surveyed people, a number of people would say they want to end racism. It's bad. And so then, the whole neoliberal post-racial, post-Obama, or even quoting MLK about using it to justify racial color-blindness, misquoting him. But it's this idea that, "Well, if we just get rid of race, we can get rid of racism."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Right. Right. Yeah, I've heard that a ton. I think those intentions, those statements are well-intentioned. I think folks are just tired of it all. But because there's so much confusion on the front end, when I said this, the directionality so to speak, does racism leads to race or race lead to racism? And so there is this assumption even when people are tired and really want to remedy racial inequities, I think the starting point is the issue, if we just don't have race anymore, there'll be no racism. But again, that assumes racism leads to racism. That race leads to racism, sorry. But the starting point has to be at the assumptions of humans, like racism. The idea that people... That we are... So, let me back up for just a second.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

In contemporary America, we're less likely to hear this kind of explicit racial hierarchy. But it's coded in different ways. It's coded in the type of neighborhoods people live in. So, when people say that there's a "bad neighborhood" or a "sketchy neighborhood" that's indicative of something much bigger, or, "Oh that's the good school versus the bad school." The fact that we can put value labels on schools is problematic to me. The fact that we can put value labels, "good" and "bad" on neighborhoods, is problematic to me. So no, people are less likely to say, at least the people I engage with, that may be people who think there's a racial hierarchy. But usually, in commonplace conversations, there's no hierarchical language. Explicit hierarchical language is embedded in other things. And so when I hear about "good schools versus bad schools, good neighborhoods versus bad neighborhoods," those are the type of hierarchical... how hierarchy get encoded in the everyday practices of Americans. And so, my remedy is that we need to recognize that number one. For the mere fact that people racialized as Black have been persistently poor over time is how the hierarchy manifests itself.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so people can say, "Well, there's a civil rights movement so people can live where they want to live or go to school where they want to go to school." Or just, "If people picked themselves up by their bootstraps and did all the right things." And it's much more complex than that. So if we start from the idea that human beings living in the United States shouldn't be faced with challenges of a "good school versus bad school," if we start with the premise that human beings living in the United States shouldn't have an option of a "good neighborhood versus a bad neighborhood," and all of those are policy decisions. These things are not coming... don't exist by happenstance. We know what happened in the 1930s with the New Deal. There's enough books written, enough articles written about FDR's New Deal, but we had a thing called Jim Crow that restricted equality across persons.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And that has far reaching implications to our present. So no, the starting point isn't about race. The starting point is racism and its short-term and long-term impact on humans. So we start from the fact that we're all human beings and no human being should have an option of good versus bad schools, good versus bad neighborhood. Just those two, just for the sake of this podcast and this example, that everyone should have to be in conditions that are equitable. And if we can do that via policy, through our imagination that people are all humans trying to do the best they can, and then make it an equitable system, then potentially, we can minimize this thing called race in a way that's functional for the whole entire population. I know I got a little preachy there, but this is where my passion lies.

Shimon Cohen:

No, I think... I'm right with you. And I like how you get right to that question of like... And you make that statement like, "No one should have to make that choice. And let's just start there, and then work out what the policies need to be." And at this point too, the idea that we're going to not think about race is just like, I mean it's not going to happen. Right? It's so embedded. Maybe that's like a future that we can't even see yet, but a lot needs to happen.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right. That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

Between now and that future.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right. That's right. And that's why the point of emphasis is recognizing the history. That's what CRT is about. To expose the social construction of race. The question is not as... So for me, who really cares about this work, the statement, it shouldn't be a declarative statement like, "Race is a social construction." That's what we typically do as researchers, as laypersons, et cetera. But I think it should be a question that race is socially constructed for whom? For what purpose was race socially constructed? And then, we can follow history, the history of human interaction, the history of policy development, laws, restricting access for some folks, but giving access to others. And so if we follow that right, and understand that racism as ideology and structure is a persistent feature of the United States. It's not a few bad apples. It's so embedded through how we think about the world.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

The mere fact that people racialized as Black are disproportionately poor, have low levels of wealth, has poor health, poor well-being for both adults and children relative to those who are racialized as White, that should be telling. But usually, people who really think that race is a biological idea, use those same statistics to make an argument, "See, it's not my fault that Black people are disproportionately poor or disproportionately incarcerated." And so if we understand the history of how it got this way. And I may be naive in thinking this, but I really believe that people truly understood this particular history, this narrative, that we can start having fruitful conversations and fruitful policy making and a way to ameliorate or end our racial inequities.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, that part you were just saying that the explanation of the current inequity, and Bonilla-Silva just really influenced my thinking on all of this.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Likewise.

Shimon Cohen:

Racism Without Racists is just incredible and I encourage everyone to read it. But this idea that this biological basis for racism and race, and to explain these inequities then shifts to a cultural explanation. Like, "Well, look at how they raise their kids," or, "Single moms..." All the stereotypes that we've heard.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

To the listeners, when I said people racialized as Black, it made me think, well, there's a reason I need to explain why I say that. So because race is socially constructed, and this is Professor Williams really grappling with these issues. If I say White people or Black people, then it runs the risk of reproducing this essentialist or biological understanding of racial groups. And so I'm trying extremely hard to minimize the implications for the essentialist logic of race. And so I decided to say people racialized as White, people racialized as Black, people racialized as Latino or Hispanic, or people racialized as Asian, or Native because the point of emphasis I'm trying to make is the racialization process. The meaning given to particular groups to serve a particular purpose. And I care about that.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Beyond that, I do... To your point about this cultural stuff, when we think about... And I'm using people racialized as Black as an example because that's my line of research. And so I always make these comments whether in my writing or on Twitter, that people racialized as Black have always been blamed for their own oppression. Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so when we think about chattel slavery, but the thing was, Black people themselves, it's not people of European descent that Africans are not fully human. And so you're putting the point of emphasis back on the oppressed group themselves. Or Jim Crow laws. We justify Jim Crow laws by using "cultural

explanations" and say, "Well, people racialized as Black are more likely to commit crimes or are violent or drug addicts and drug abusers. And thus, to maintain the purity of Whiteness, we can't be with them." So again, you're putting the point of emphasis of the oppression onto the people who are actually oppressed. And so those narratives aren't new, it's just the processes are not new. How we approach it morphs and change over time to fit our current understandings of the world.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Now, no one would say... Well again, people in my circle that I know wouldn't say, "Oh, people who are Black are biologically inferior to people who are White." But what we would say is that "Black people commit more crimes so they need to be locked up," or, "Black folks are having disproportionate babies out of wedlock. They're just leeching off the system. That's why we have poverty. That's why we have welfare and all this stuff."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so those narratives aren't... Again, I want listeners to know that this is Professor William's imagination working here. I want to believe that people really believe that. They really believe that it's on the groups themselves. Because in sociology, we have this theorem about situations defined as real, or real in their consequences. So, you have a large group of people in the population who believes, and it could be policymakers too, who believe that racial inequality that we experience historically and contemporarily, but more so temporarily, is a byproduct of the groups themselves.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

People actually believe that with all their heart because they believe that racial groups are biologically real. And that's why, again, I'm going back to what I said in the beginning, if people assume racial groups exist a priori, it just exists, and that racism is a thing of the past, and people would, "Oh yes, slavery was wrong. Jim Crow laws were wrong. But now, oh, we're living in a post-racial society, the civil rights movement ended it all." Right. So now, people are much more willing to say it's not about racism. It's about the groups themselves. And that's a byproduct of understanding the relationship, at least in my own imagination, that we, as a country hasn't disentangled the relationship between race and racism.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Because if we understand that racism makes race possible, then that argument doesn't fit anymore. Because if racism makes race possible, then the inequities we see in the country should be taken as a given. It's no surprise that people, Black, have lower levels of wealth, more likely to be poor, all the adverse outcomes. So we should come to the table saying, "Given the history of this country, this is a byproduct. We shouldn't be surprised. We need to fix this because we are the ones that made it happen as a country." So, I'm going to stop there.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. No, as you're talking, one real, clear example of this that applies to social work but crosses over because your focus is on family well-being is the family policing system, aka child welfare. These parent education programs. So the assumption is that, parents who lost their... who had their kids removed, not lost, stolen from them, often because of poverty, but it gets coded as neglect for these laws, all they need is training from some social worker or parent-educator. They just need the curriculum on how to be a better parent, which totally dismisses everything you're saying that like they're in this situation economically, they don't have the resources, so whatever's going on that might be considered neglect if

the money was given, not to the parent education, but to actually helping them economically and materially, there would not be that neglect, that so-called neglect.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, was come to mind. This is not new. This has been going on for a long time, and it's a very individualistic-based argument. It's something unique about these "people". This narrative, just what Sandy Darity calls it, "It refuses to die." It resurrects every so often. So we talk about it, it goes away for a little bit in the public imagination, then it comes back all of a sudden. And so these narratives, again, are a byproduct of people really believing individual level notion of inequality, inequality that exists in this country.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And in many ways, I really believe that it helps people's psychological well-being. If I believe that inequality that exists is owned to another person, then I don't have to worry about doing anything. I don't have to worry about that the U.S. can be a depressing place for some. Because if I don't want to believe that, then individual-level explanations allows me to render invisible power differentials. It allows me to render invisible history. It really allows me to render the lived experience of other folks in the conditions they have experienced historically and contemporarily invisible. And that's a convenient way to live like, "Hey, tough luck. You got the short end of the stick." Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Right.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

But what critical scholars are saying like, "No, that affects you too. Because it may be happening to somebody else right now, but it can happen to you tomorrow if we're not careful. If we render every..." And we saw something very similar with people during The Great Recession when people were losing their lives, kind of, suicide, people... Because, "If I'm not making enough money to feed my family, for example, then it must be something I did wrong." And that's a difficult thing for some folks to really address. And to your point about families, I'm, again, trained as a family sociologist. History tells us that this... So let's take, for example, the racial differentials in marriage rates and non-marital childbearing, for example. Marriage is on the decline for everyone, but it's steeper for people racialized as Black women, racialized as Black. And the non-marital childbearing rates are higher among women racialized as Black.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

If you see those statistics and say, "See, if people just stop having kids out of wedlock then..." It's much more complicated than that because part of the policies as you're referring to is this relationship training, for example, assumes that marriage is some type of magic wand to ameliorate inequality. And part of the work that I do is to showcase, even when people racialized as Black or Latino are married, they're still more likely to be poor compared to married people who are racialized as White. So marriage doesn't make things equal across racial groups. It's an illusion. It is a language technique. If people want to not be poor, then they should do something to stop that, like get married for example. And somehow marriage became this... For a long time, you see that even during the Welfare Reform with Clinton. These time limits on welfare. This push towards marriage is the bedrock or the centerpiece of America.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And this is what... And when I write about this, I lean on Julian Go's work, to demonstrate that this is kind of this notion of Eurocentric universalisms. That if it works well for people racialized as White, then it must be universally right. And what happens is that we ignore the histories of particular racialized groups and the conditions in which they had to live under and currently live with. So for example, one, reading historians and legal scholars on Black marriages, for example, people racialized as Black couldn't just get married historically. So we see in the Reconstruction era the state use marriage as a way for people racialized as Black to gain citizenship rights. So, to say that marriage is this magic wand to ameliorate inequality is just ahistorical number, one. And just plain wrong, number two.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's why we had laws in this country where people, for example, Black and White, couldn't marry each other because the notion of marriage was about maintaining a kind of purity of Whiteness to restrict "race mixing." So the idea of family, and marriage in particular, has always been used as a way to deflect power, to deflect ingrained inequities, to deflect the humanity of people racialized as Black.

Shimon Cohen:

That's a really great example. I'm glad to tie it back to that because that part of like, "If it's right for... If it works for White people, it should work for everyone too." And that comes up so often in the interventions that are proposed, researched, taught in social work too, is like, certain types of therapy. I mean I could give a whole list of that. Just like, it was only test— it was only evaluated with White people. So I really appreciate you giving that example. There's so many things we could get into. A couple of things I want to make sure we cover before we wrap up is that as we talk about these foundations of racism and race, just making real clear that this is rooted in White supremacy and anti-Blackness, like those are integral into in this formation. And I just wanted to get your thoughts on that.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Right. Right. And so I'm glad you circled back to that because that's important. I think, as many scholars have written, that the notion of White supremacy only gets reduced to neo-Nazis or the KKK. But thinking about White supremacy as a system, again, where ideologies and laws and policies, social practices, language, and discourse ends up disproportionately benefiting people who are racialized as White. It's just patriarchy as a system that disproportionately benefit people who are men. And so it's much more nuanced than some hate group. It's a system in which we live and anti-Blackness is the underbelly of it all. And what I mean by that is that there wasn't a time in American history historically where people were equal and then became unequal in the sense of the American history.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

The inequality has always been there. The power differentials has always been there. And I think when we understand that, because what I hear people saying in response to White supremacy anti-Blackness is that, "I haven't done anything. It wasn't me."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And I get why people say that. Because again, people want to absolve themselves from these atrocities. But framing it as a system that only knows how to do what it was designed to do can help us to think deeper about ways to create policies and laws that make life more equitable. And again, I appreciate the notion of White supremacy and anti-Blackness because it's more of a system. And I'm slowing down

here because I really want to get this right, and I want to be clear, is that... Right? A car, for example, is only designed to drive on the road. It's not designed to fly. The car system can only use its four wheels, for example, to move from place to place whereas a plane was designed to fly. It can only do what it was designed to do. Imagine, if we take that particular thinking to human beings and why we have inequities. We have to understand that the system, as White supremacy as a system, is designed to disproportionately favor people racialized as White and disproportionately disfavor, for lack of words, people racialized as Black.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And when we recognize that we can actually remedy it. But we have to have enough compassion and empathy with other human beings to say, "You know what? This system is designed to do this thing even against my willing to make it like this." Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

If you want to bring in your personal like you wasn't there, then cool. But you are here now.

Shimon Cohen:

Right. Exactly.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And the question becomes now, what are we doing to ameliorate it? What are we doing to end racial inequities? And again, a system can be broken, but first, we have to admit that there is a system of inequities and then we have to fight like hell to move towards a more equitable society via laws, policies, social practices, discourse and language, and even the ideologies we have about the world. And so if we can really pull back the metaphorical covers of the system to expose it for what it is, then I think it's much more feasible to reckon with.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so, one last thing here before I turned it back over to you is that there is this notion that racism, for example, as we talked earlier, is about some intentional egregious act that somebody commits against another person. And I think that's counterproductive. It's why I moved away from calling people racist. I think name-calling can hinder the greater good.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so I use a system of White supremacy as an oppressive system to demonstrate that we all, even Professor Williams, and if you, of Ibram Kendi's book, "How to be an Anti-Racist," he talks about his own contribution of racism. And I read that and was like, "Yeah, growing up, I thought something was unique about Black people too." The system socializes me to believe in anti-Blackness. It's only when I'm exposed to new information when I'm exposed to new ways of thinking that I recognize that I too am a contributor to racial inequities even though I'm racialized as Black. And so I have to actively not be racist, that is to be an anti-racist in a way that my... I don't take for granted how I contribute to an inherently oppressed system. Even as a man, I have to consciously think about the words I use. And

while other people would... I hear people say, "Wait, we can't say anything now. It's offending people." Well, that's... When it was normal, it wasn't good. Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Right. It's like, too bad.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

Go figure it out. Come on.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right. And so I'm saying all this to say that, again, over the course of my life, I've moved away from making this about an individual personal attribute of a racist person or a sexist person. Those people exist, don't get me wrong. But I think talking about making change, we have to shift our language in a way that really exposes how we all contribute to a system of inequities. And if we contribute to it, we can also get rid of it. And I'm going to leave it right there.

Shimon Cohen:

No, I really appreciate that. And one thing I'm interested in your thoughts on this before we wrap up, cause I was starting to write this down as we were talking. Because you kept coming back, and you should, to this idea that people racialized as Black were considered not fully human. And to connect that to our current democracy and threat. Well, first of all, I don't believe we've ever fully had true democracy in this country. And this is part of why, and it's part of this threat that's looming over us today, is that that "Black people not fully being human" led to— that belief, that belief in Black people, and codified in the constitution led to the Electoral College.

Shimon Cohen:

Which creates a situation where we don't have a true elect— representative democracy because certain states disproportionately affect... Someone could win the popular vote nationally and still lose the election. And I think the only times that's happened like a Republican has won the Electoral College vote and lost to a Democrat in the popular vote.

Shimon Cohen:

And the reason I bring this up is I'm just thinking, you were talking so much about connecting this ideology to policy, and to me, this seems like a really major one that's drastically affecting this country and the ability to then create future policies to attempt to remedy some of these situations is this deep... The fact that there was this belief that Black people were not fully human, this part of that has never been rectified in terms of how it affects voting today.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Yeah, the voting one and the Electoral College is a major example. Appreciate you bringing it up. But much of it though, I think that's... So there's a book called, Edited Volume of Anti-Blackness, a really powerful book. And so when I make the argument of what some... Other scholars, similar, make the

argument about... And I'm going to move away from the Electoral College, which you bring up a good example. But more broadly, so the fact that we never dealt with it. So, I make these in my writing and when I give talks, I talk about that. The idea that people racialized as Black were not fully human, was never remedied. Right?

Shimon Cohen:

Right.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

What we did do is basically tell people who were racialized as White they couldn't do something. I mean, think about it. We say, "You can't own other people." Part of getting rid of chattel slavery.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

But it didn't say, "Oh, by the way, people racialized as Black are also fully human." And I think that's also a contribution to Jim Crow laws. So the idea that people racialized as Black weren't fully human didn't go away. It's the mechanisms and processes of oppression went away. They say, "Oh, we're not saying that people of European descent are White or human, and people racialized as Black are non-human." We haven't fully rectified that. We didn't really, as a country say, "Oops, we made a really horrible egregious mistake by putting humans in different groups and stratifying them hierarchically." What we did was say, "The mechanisms through which we oppress is unconstitutional." But what happens? Because the premise never went away of the humans versus the non-humans, new mechanisms emerge to justify, exploiting, domination, exclusion, the maintenance of inequities. So to your point, that's absolutely right, and we're still in this moment now. The idea that people racialized as Black don't have a humanity.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's why we can do the type of laws that we have. That's why we see the killings of unarmed people racialized as Black. This is part of the human... This is the manifestation of the human versus the non-human narrative, that I think that the United States hasn't really reckoned with. And so those are the things that I care about, that I've tweeted about like, "FYI, people racialized as Black are humans too."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And so part of that. And the reason I say that is that inequality just didn't fall out the air like metaphorical manna from heaven. These are laws and policies that led to this, and not just at one moment in time, but it persists over time. And to live in a country where people who look like you, racially speaking, who have been disproportionately poor, low levels of wealth, poor health, "poor neighborhoods," poor schools. For a country to say... And I critique social science and sociology in particular about this, that we do a lot of racial gap gazing like, "Ooh, look how poor... Look how worse off people racialized as Black are to people racialized as White."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

We do that in many racial inequality studies and I'm actually tired of that. And I'm frustrated by that. Because what we're saying is, "Oh, let's just look at the inequality, and maybe some individual level characteristic can help "explain" why it exists." And I'm like, "No, we know why it exists. Racism is the reason why it exists." The question becomes how do we talk about the mechanisms that... What are the mechanisms of via racism that maintains this gap? And part of my assessment is that the non-human, the perception of non-human of people racialized as Black runs so deep that just looking at racial gaps in

our statistics is enough. And I think that's indicative of the fact that we haven't reckoned with the human versus the non-human. Because to be honest with you, I'm not just racialized as Black, as an individual, my family, my friends, because our social networks tend to be racially homogenous.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

I just can't look at a racial statistic and then go home. That has implications for the people around me. And again, I think the United States inability to... Well, lack of addressing the human versus the non-human dichotomy is why we can just say, "Oh look, Black folks are disproportionately incarcerated," and then just walk away. No. And I don't want to undermine organizations that's fighting against these particular atrocities. So I don't want to dismiss that. But my larger point is, why has it been so long for poverty rates to be the way they are, incarceration rates to be the way they are? And I think, again, I want to make sure that I say that this is my own imagination working here is that we haven't fully grappled with as a country, this notion of the human versus the non-human, and the manifestations we see and inequities is a result of that.

Shimon Cohen:

I agree with you a hundred percent on all of that. I agree a hundred percent. And like you said, and I think it's easier to put out... to look at these gaps than to actually do something. Doing something becomes very hard.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right. That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

Because of what you just said. Because then, you go up against these forces that at the core do not believe in full humanity for all people, particularly, for Black people. And as we're wrapping up, I just want to make sure I allow you some additional space to... Any message you want to close with and put out there. The mic is all yours.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

I appreciate that. I don't study racial inequality, particularly the inequality of people racialized as Black in their families because I am racialized as Black. It's much more nuanced for me. I just so happen to be racialized as Black. Part of this academic endeavor that I'm on is that I recognize how epistemologies, our knowledge production, is often coming out a Eurocentric lens or a White racial imagination. And it's time for us to reckon with that. New perspectives, new epistemologies, new lenses to see the world is a good thing. Critical scholars are not trying to be overly antagonistic against folk with just recognizing that what we have thought to be the truth hasn't been the truth, it's been a particular type of truth predicated on a limited imagination of the world.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

And if we're going to get it right, we have to be ready and willing, both academics and laypersons, oh, and policymakers for that matter, to see the world as a much more complicated space in which history shapes our contemporary experiences. And until we really reckon with that, we're going to find ourselves repeating inequitable histories over and over again. In order to move forward in a more just equitable society, we must and need to really reckon with our history, be it our epistemologies, our ideologies, our frame of thinking, in order to give hope to the hopeless. Thank you.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you so much for saying that. Thank you for... I've learned so much from following you on Twitter. We'll put information in the show notes so folks can follow you. And I know many others are excited for your voice and your growing contribution. Just like you said, like these... As CRT would say, "Counternarratives."

Dr. Deadric Williams:

That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

That are so critical to be out there. Again, I want to thank you for coming on the podcast, and thank you for doing the work.

Dr. Deadric Williams:

Hey, you are welcome. And right back at you. Thank you for the invite. This is not lost on me. This is... There are several scholars you could have reached out to, and I just am flattered and honored that you invited me, so I appreciate you too.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you for listening to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change. I hope you enjoyed the podcast. Please follow on Twitter and leave positive reviews on iTunes. If you're interested in being a guest or know someone who's doing great work, please get in touch. Thank you for doing real work to make this world a better place.