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Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America

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Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America

Abstract

This is a film review of *Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America* (2021), directed by Emily Kunstler.

Keywords

Race Relations, White Supremacy

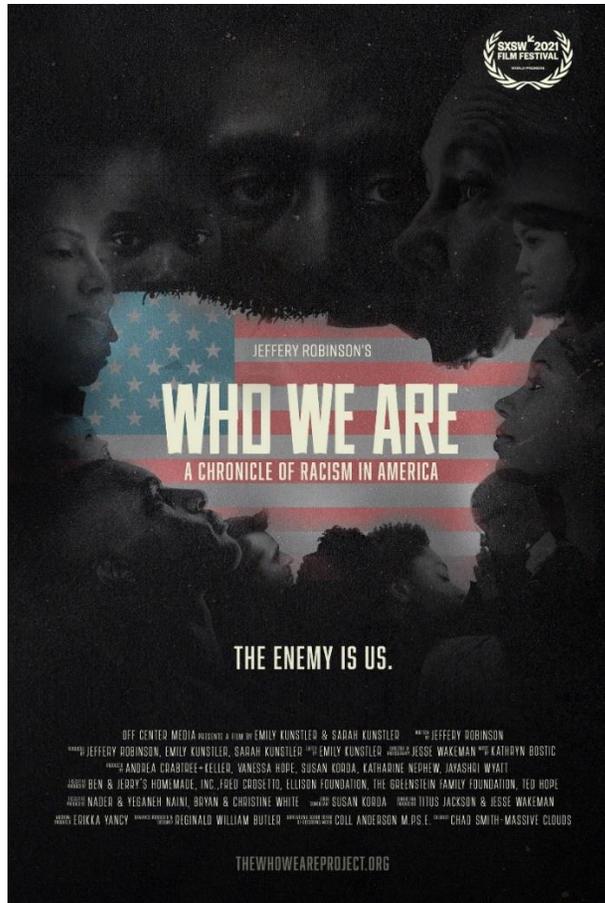
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Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America (2021), dir. Emily Kunstler

Jeffery Robinson is deputy legal director and the director of the ACLU Trone Center for Justice and Equality, which houses the organization's work on criminal justice, racial justice, and reform issues. As part of this work, he heads the “Who We Are” Project, a group which—much like the 1619 Project—seeks to educate Americans about the extent to which white supremacy has affected the nation since before its founding. And although the 1619 Project has generated controversy due to some disputed historical claims, in this documentary Robinson presents evidence in a thorough and measured way that feels incontrovertible. The Who We Are Project has produced a podcast as well as educational materials with the mission of correcting the omissions and errors in the way that American history has been taught, and this film is part of that mission.

The film centers around a talk that Robinson gave on June 19, 2018, but also includes his visits to historic sites and interviews with individuals who are in many cases eyewitnesses to the events he describes. To dramatize the opposition to this effort, he interviews a man who stands with a Confederate flag in front of a monument, who claims that the Civil War had nothing to do with slavery, and that slaves were treated “like family.” Robinson asks this White man if he would object to being enslaved by a Black man, and it appears this is the first time the man considered that. He finally admits that slavery was “evil,” but is clearly confused about a number of historical facts. Hence the necessity of Robinson’s task.

Robinson is clear that he is not blaming today’s White people for slavery, or suggesting the nation is all bad; every nation and every person has done bad as well as good things. This is not about attacking the nation, but about saving it. He points to the unrecognized implicit biases against Black people, which even he as a Black man shares. And then he looks to primary documents that show why we have this bias: the protections of slavery and slaveowners in the US Constitution, the Supreme Court decisions that supported it, the notorious third verse of the Star-Spangled Banner that accepts the legitimacy of slavery. These are well-known examples to those who know US history, but this is an accessible and succinct presentation of them. As a lawyer, Robinson understands well the legal structures that undergirded slavery as well as segregation, and he conveys the wealth of evidence in a way that shows how extensive these protections were without ever becoming pedantic.

Robinson admits that he learned things he never knew himself in the course of doing this research. Not everyone will know about the 1921 Tulsa massacre, in which White men bombed Black businesses from airplanes and then shot Black people in the street. This effectively destroyed prosperous Black communities there that were thriving, in what can only be described as an act of

war. No one was prosecuted. Robinson also traces the dismantling of Reconstruction and the extensive lynching that supported it; legal structures were created and sustained by a systematic program of terrorism that brooked no revolt. Blacks lost the vote and any positions of power they had gained. In more recent history, he discusses school and housing segregation, and his narrative becomes personal when he relates how he benefitted from being able to attend an integrated school in Memphis. His parents were able to buy a home in the district only through the ruse of having White friends buy it first, and his father sat out in front of his home with a shotgun for several nights after they moved in. He visits with White High School friends, who reveal ways in which they protected him that he never knew. Robinson knows he was lucky to have these advantages, but he also makes clear that Blacks should not have to rely on so much luck just to have the same opportunity to succeed.

At the time when Robinson gave this talk, the Black Lives Matter movement had not yet obtained the widespread support and publicity that it came to have in the summer of 2020, but it was well on its way after the deaths of many Black people at the hands of police who bore no consequences for their actions. People need to hear this history now more than ever, and this film could be an excellent tool for education and discussion in schools, religious institutions, and other community groups. It is my hope that the Who We Are Project will be taken seriously by Americans, for as Robinson says, our future is at stake.