

Erin Welsh

Hi, I'm Erin Welsh and this is This Podcast Will Kill You. Welcome back everyone to the latest installment of the TPWKY Book Club. I hope you all are having fun so far and are learning so, so much because I certainly am. Seriously, this is like a dream come true. And I'd love to hear from you all about these episodes or the books we're talking about. What did you think? Did you enjoy these books as much as I did? What questions do you wish I had asked? Are there other books you'd love to add to the book club list? Send your thoughts to our CONTACT US form on our website [thispodcastwillkillyou.com](http://thispodcastwillkillyou.com) or our email [thispodcastwillkillyou@gmail.com](mailto:thispodcastwillkillyou@gmail.com).

I hope you have more room on your shelves or space on your e-reader because this week's book is yet another must read. 'Superior: The Return of Race Science' by award winning science journalist and author Angela Saini, published in 2019, traces the origins of race science and examines its disturbing persistence in medical and scientific research today. Saini, whose other fantastic books examine sexism and scientific research in her book 'Inferior' and the complex roots of patriarchy in 'The Patriarchs' which just now out, joins me on this bonus episode to chat about the topics she explores in 'Superior'.

Listeners of the podcast are likely familiar with some of the story of how eugenics rose to prominence, especially in the United States, as the field of genetics provided a means through which eugenicists could classify individuals or groups as quote unquote "fit" or quote unquote "unfit" to reproduce. We've discussed eugenic laws and policies in the context of Huntington's disease, diabetes, hemophilia, and most recently epilepsy, just to name a few. In some cases, you were forbidden to get married if you had been diagnosed with any one of a number of conditions or diseases, scored within a certain range of an IQ test, were alleged to have committed a crime, or had skin color that was deemed inferior. Eugenic policies didn't stop at outlawing marriage to certain individuals however. There was also of course the incredibly frequent practice of forced sterilization.

The appalling popularity and widespread acceptance of eugenics in the US often gets downplayed or omitted entirely in some histories which portray Nazi Germany as the originator of eugenics. When in fact, Adolf Hitler took inspiration from the eugenic policies of the US. But while the origin of eugenics dates back decades before the Third Reich, the racist ideas and prejudices that gave rise to eugenics had existed for hundreds of years in the form of race science. And race science certainly did not die out with the fall of Nazi Germany after WWII. You can find ample evidence of race science in medical, genetic, and biological research done today, helped along by the burgeoning field of genomics, with some scientists continuing to search for a genetic basis to race, despite never finding one because it doesn't exist, or looking for population level genetic differences in intelligence, or promoting race-based medicine.

While some of these researchers make no attempt to hide their racist motivations for conducting this research, others may be well meaning but still participate in the type of research that supports the notion that racial groups can be defined biologically and classified hierarchically. In her widely acclaimed book 'Superior', Angela Saini explores the deep history of race science, tracing how racial categories were constructed, and examining what purposes they served and continue to serve, particularly in the justification of slavery and colonization. She charts the repackaging that race science underwent as scientific knowledge about fields such as genetics and genomics expanded. As Saini reveals, this insidious repackaging has allowed for the continued presence of race science today in many forms, some of which are overtly racist and others that are unintentionally so but harmful all the same. 'Superior' is a compelling, eye opening, and essential read that feels increasingly relevant, chillingly so, in the political and scientific landscape today. I'm very excited to get to the interview itself. So we'll take a quick break here and when we get back, we'll dive right in.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

Angela, thank you so, so very much for being here today. I loved your book 'Superior' for how brilliantly you trace the problematic history of eugenics and race science and its disturbing persistence in medicine and scientific research today. So tell me, what is race science and what made you decide to write a book about it?

Angela Saini

Race science is number one the belief that there are biological races that exist, that we are not necessarily one human species, that we can be divided to some degree into separate breeds or types of person. But more fundamentally, I think throughout the history of race science it was the belief that there was also a hierarchy between these races, that there was some populations that were genetically or through evolution more superior to others.

Erin Welsh

At what point did you say hey, I want to write a book about this? How did you first learn about it and then how did that turn into writing a whole book?

Angela Saini

Well to some degree this book has been in the back of my mind since I was a child. So I grew up in a part of London, southeast London, in which the far right was very active in the 1980s and 1990s. There were a number of racist murders in the area, broader area where I lived. And the town where me and my sisters lived, we were one of few, at that time, one of few, very, very few ethnic minorities. It's very different now, my parents still live there and it's completely different demographically. But when we were growing up, racism really was the backdrop to my teenage years in ways that sometimes I think it's difficult for people to understand about Britain now, for younger people living there now. It was just all the time, this was a fact of life that you were confronted with.

And that was part of the reason I went into journalism in the first place. One of the first things I remember writing for other people was about this violent racist incident that me and my sister were subjected to when we had some visitors visiting our home and we were out with them. And I read that out in class when I think I was around 8 or 9 and very quickly realized the power, the cathartic power for myself in being able to write things down and process them. But also the power that could have in helping other people understand. When I got to university many years later, I got involved in anti racism activism, I became one of the co-chairs of the Anti-Racism Committee at Oxford. And I started writing for the Student Press about race and racism. And when I left university rather than becoming an engineer, which I think I would have done otherwise, if my life had been different, I went into journalism. I worked at ITN and the BBC as a news reporter, TV news reporter for years.

And then when I went freelance to write science books, my writing and my reporting was driven by this idea that science is a system of power just like any other; is an establishment that consists of people who are worried about things like their own personal status, funding. It's informed by the politics of the world around it. So my books really look at that and try to understand what part does science play in helping us understand ourselves but also how is science affected by the wider world around it. And when it came to writing 'Superior', you have to remember it was commissioned at a time when people still thought that we were getting past race, this is an issue for previous generations, not for future generations, which was very naive of course.

And it was actually quite a hard sell in that sense. It wasn't an easy one to convince people that a book like this needed to be written. But of course in hindsight things have only got worse. I mean the rise of ethnic nationalism, populism all around the world, and the horrific ways in which scientific racism or pseudoscientific racism has been co-opted by the far right. And it has entered the mainstream to some degree, if you look at things like the Great Replacement theory, which is hugely informed by these pseudoscientific ideas, it has turned out to be prescient. But it didn't feel that way when I started writing it.

Erin Welsh

Before we get into the insidious ways that race science is still done today, I want to start at the beginning. How and when did the concept of race originate? And how did the growth of science, especially disciplines like systematics or anthropology, deepen racial categories?

Angela Saini

Well we have to understand that the development of modern western science happened at a particular point in time. And that's not to say that science didn't exist before that, it did. I mean it may have been called different things and it may have looked different, it may have not involved the empirical method or the kind of rigor or establishment that evolved later. But science was practiced all over the world in lots of different ways. But during the development of modern western science in the 16th/17th/18th centuries in Europe and later in North America, the political reality was one of a growing imperialism, imperial force. And then later the development of slavery, the transatlantic slave trade. Now slavery of course also has been practiced all over the world for as long as we have records.

But the nature of that political reality necessarily informed the way that science developed because as European enlightenment naturalists were looking at the natural world and saying can we codify it? Can we start placing boundaries and develop a taxonomy around nature? You know, different plants and animals, different types of creature and how they're related to each other. Can we do the same for humans? Which sounds like a perfectly logical thing to do. But of course as they were doing this, they didn't have a very thorough understanding of how human variation worked all over the world and they certainly weren't fully convinced at that point that we were just one species, as we know we are now, or that we are a very homogeneous species, as we know we are now. And so a lot of this understanding came from sometimes just myth and legend or travelers' reports or folk ideas that they had about how human difference played out, very superficial things. But particularly the political hierarchies at that time.

So for example, Europeans would have looked at the transatlantic slave trade, they would have encountered people in states of subservience and other people who had power over them and then started to equate that in their imaginations with some idea of a racial hierarchy or some idea that there are groups that are better than others. Which as I said before, societies have always done, the powerful have always done that to the less powerful in different ways. Men have done it to women, the free have done it to slaves, citizens have done it to non citizens, natives have done it to foreigners. This is part of how humans operate when it comes to thinking about their own status and the status of others. But science, which we imagine to be this objective project, was affected by this too. So for example, last year I remember I was in New Orleans on holiday and there's a beautiful little historical museum there. And in that museum, you can see a book from around the middle of the 18th century called The Black Code.

This is a very thick book produced by the French authorities there which was a guide for how the black residents of the city should behave with respect to the white citizens of the city and vice versa. Now why was it called The Black Code? Earlier that book would have been termed The Slave Code. But because of the transatlantic slave trade and the demographics around that, blackness began in the 18th century to be associated with subservience and slavery. And so when you read these early taxonomies of race where they divide people up by color, and that's just one arbitrary way of dividing people, there is no natural way of doing it but that's just one way, you can see blackness is associated with slavery, that brownness is associated with something else, yellowness is associated with something else. And lo and behold, whiteness is always elevated as this perfect special category of human that is just superior to everyone. So it's very self serving. It is very political.

And this is something I like to remind people of is that during the Black Lives Matter resurgence after the murder of George Floyd, there were some scientists that came out and said stop politicizing science. Why are you bringing anti racism into science? Well if we did not have anti racism in science, trust me, we would be perpetuating these pseudoscientific myths. It started off political and that's why it's so important to continually think about these things and how we might interrogate them and challenge them and correct them in order to have a better science of human difference going forward. But that original sin if you like or those original mistakes around race, the development of this idea of race, came to form the bedrock of the science of human difference for hundreds of years.

So by the time you get to the 19th century, by which time the pseudoscientific beliefs are deeply rooted in the western scientific establishment, you have serious physicians and biologists claiming that black people have thicker skin than white people, that their bones are denser, that they don't feel pain in the same way, legitimizing slavery and colonialism on the basis that races are just different and that some races have a right to control others or to civilize others, ideas about the primitive or the modern, what it meant to be civilized kind of fed into all of this. And we still live with the legacy of it to this day.

Erin Welsh

We often still talk about other kinds of early humans or hominids in a way that places us humans at the very top, using words like faster or smarter or stronger. And one of my favorite parts of your book is when you discuss how this hierarchical language recently disappeared specifically for Neanderthals. Can you take us through this public image makeover that Neanderthals underwent?

Angela Saini

It was fascinating for me. I spent a portion of my research time when I was writing 'Superior' in Australia, which is one of the most fascinating countries in the world culturally because of the depth and length of different aboriginal communities and their kind of cultural ideas about the world and time and space. And it's just incredibly mind blowing. I mean it's difficult for me to put into words how revolutionary it is for someone raised in the west to be witness to a system of thought that is so diametrically different from what you're used to. And we have to remember the racial history of Australia was one in which these entire cultures, there was an attempt to wipe them out.

One of the very first pieces of legislation to pass in Australia in the 19th century was the White Australia Act which essentially tried to breed out the color from Australia. It forcibly took children away from their parents, raised them in boarding schools, something that in North America of course is a story we're also familiar with because of the story of indigenous Americans to whom this was also done. And it's only relatively recently we're starting to understand the scale of the horrors of what went on in these institutions. But it does mean that while not destroyed, cultures were undermined all in the name of this idea of white supremacy, that the white settlers in Australia had a right to that territory that the communities that had lived there for tens of thousands of years did not, this idea that they were primitive and doomed to die out.

Now in the 19th century is also when the first bones of Neanderthals were discovered and identified. In the Neanderthal Valley in Germany, let's remember, one of the first things archaeologists and scientists did when they discovered those bones was to go and compare them to the bones of living Aboriginal Australians. Why did they do that to people living on the other side of the world? And the reason of course is that here was this form of human or species of humans it was conceived of then that had gone extinct. And in the racial hierarchy or taxonomy of that time, there was a belief that other races were also doomed to go extinct, among them the indigenous Australian communities of Australia and New Zealand. And so if anyone was going to share some resemblance to Neanderthals, scientists, in this ridiculous pseudoscientific myth that they had created, thought it must be them. This comparison was made.

And even to this day if you look up the dictionary definition of Neanderthals, of course it's not just this extinct form of human but also kind of a brutish, oafish, stupid man. He's a Neanderthal. So for years this association had been made. What's fascinating for me as a journalist who writes on this topic is that in the last few decades, as it became clear that perhaps there was some mixing between Neanderthals and humans to the extent that we share some Neanderthal ancestry, many of us on the planet share some Neanderthal ancestry, but particularly in Europe of course because Neanderthals lived in Europe, that those of European heritage share particularly this Neanderthal ancestry. The language around Neanderthals began to shift and it's palpable in the scientific literature but also in the popular press. People started saying that Neanderthals were smarter than perhaps we thought they were, that they were more human just like us.

And that I find particularly galling, this idea that here is this extinct form of human of whom we know very little about, very little. And the rehabilitation that Neanderthals have gone through, drawing them into the circle of humanity, when 100 years ago or more, living people, living modern humans were driven out of the circle of humanity by virtue of this idea that they were closer to Neanderthals. No scientist or geneticist or archeologist, paleontologist, will ever admit that there is anything racialized about this, that there is anything racist going on in the way that they frame these things. But I think it's impossible to look at that, the kind of speculation that has gone on over the last 100 years and not see that of course there is, how can there not be?

Erin Welsh

Yeah. And since this rehabilitation of the Neanderthal image, there have been many scientific studies trying to link bits of Neanderthal DNA to functional roles like immune function or sleeping patterns or brain shape. What are some of the problems with these types of studies?

Angela Saini

I don't have a problem with people doing whatever research they want. What I don't understand is why anyone would imagine that these tiny portions of that genetic legacy will somehow reinforce the idea of race. Which is what some on the far right are hoping that it will, that it will somehow show that Europeans are fundamentally different at a genetic level because of this association with Neanderthals. That is impossible. As I said before, we are genetically more homogeneous than chimpanzees. We are a very, very genetically homogeneous species. There are no black genes, there are no white genes, and there is no gene that exists in all the members of one population and not another.

But there is an undercurrent here in this research that perhaps we can isolate something that makes some people different from others. And of course that's what a lot of population genetics is about, is about finding differences, genetic differences between populations. And while I don't have kind of a theoretical problem with that, a lot of my work is about asking scientists what are they trying to achieve here? What is the end goal of all of this? And is it really about improving health or improving our understanding of humanity or is there something else going on that it may be subconscious, I don't know, but something else going on here?

Erin Welsh

In the second half of the 19th century, the introduction of the theory of evolution and then the rise of genetics paved the way for eugenics to be widely accepted. First, what is eugenics? And second, why do you think it gained so much traction especially in the US?

Angela Saini

Well in some sense, the groundwork has been laid for the ideology of eugenics for a very long time because as I said, if you start with the premise that the human species can be divided into breeds, that some people are better than others by nature, eugenics is the belief that some people should be allowed to have children and some people shouldn't or some people should be allowed to have more children than others based on their genetic fitness. That the child of beautiful clever parents is more likely to be beautiful and clever, which of course as we know is not true. But leaving aside the fact that eugenics as itself is flawed in that heredity doesn't work that way, it was popular because it spoke to that kind of scientific belief that society could be improved if we just managed reproduction, which is an idea to some degree that we still live with.

It's an idea that is woven through popular culture even now. Why are some people having loads of kids and the clever people are not having loads of kids? And what will that mean for the future? Well necessarily it won't mean anything. But we have at the back of our minds this eugenically informed idea that we want everyone in the world to be the best that they can possibly be. We want them to be the smartest, the fittest, the strongest, the tallest, and that we can somehow engineer a society like that through selective breeding or by encouraging reproduction in some than others.

And it was very popular on the left and the right, I have to add, it wasn't just... We associate it now with the Nazis in Germany and their program of racial hygiene which of course led to the Holocaust. But it was very popular among progressives, social progressives who believed very much that this was a scientific or technological solution to society's problems. If people who were criminally indigent over generations or intellectually deficient over generations, if they could just be wiped out somehow, then society's problems would be fixed. But of course as I said, it doesn't work that way.

Erin Welsh

And in your book, you discuss several modern misconceptions about eugenics. One being that eugenics was born with the fascists and Nazis of WWII and another being that it died after the war. But what is the truth behind these misconceptions? And why do you think the sanitized version of events has persisted?

Angela Saini

Well it is the big events in history that we remember. And the Holocaust is the culmination of eugenics style thinking. So of course we do associate it with Nazi Germany and perhaps it's normal that we would. But it actually started in London at University College London with the cousin of Charles Darwin, Francis Galton. It was developed with the wholehearted support of politicians like Winston Churchill and thinkers like Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf very much believed in this idea of class superiority and inferiority. So this was a popular view at the time across parts of Europe but particularly taken up in the US. So the UK itself didn't in the end carry through with any eugenics style policies, government policies. But the US did, there were sterilization policies here, there were anti immigration policies which were certainly informed I think by the eugenics movement. And there was an overlap, a very solid overlap between the American Eugenics Society and mainstream science and genetics that continued for a very long time.

There were attempts even after WWII to rehabilitate eugenics to create a kind of science of positive eugenics. There were attempts by some scientific racists like William Shockley, a Nobel Prize winning engineer who tried to create a sperm bank for Nobel Prize winners and very smart people in which he placed his own sperm. And of course that continues, Jeffrey Epstein did something similar. He was very much a dear to this idea that smart, brilliant people should be having more children. Leaving aside the fact what qualities do we really want in the next generation? Do we really want more William Shockleys and Jeffrey Epsteins? I'm not sure about that. But the point is that we live with these ideas and sometimes in very subtle ways. Even now sometimes I look at the exhortations on social media to be the best version of yourself. And I think to myself how different is that really from this eugenic idea that we are not enough as we are, that we can't accept people just as they are and be happy with that?

The desperate kind of quest that modern day middle class parents have to turn their children into superhuman kids through training and classes, and I very much imagine one day probably genetic selection. They're not happy with what they have. And that is tragic because if there is one idea I think that has evolved throughout the 20th and 21st century that I think it would be tragic for us to let go of is that every life matters and every person is valuable in their own way, regardless of how productive they are or how useful they are to society. They're still precious and useful to us, to themselves. And it's awful that we still live this idea that we are not enough. I think I very much think that is a eugenics style of thinking that we hang on to.

Erin Welsh

Yeah, absolutely. In recent decades, the growing availability of genomic technology and data has led to the continued search for a biological basis for race despite never having found one. And one example of this type of research that you give in your book is the Human Genome Diversity Project whose creators, as you point out, don't appear to be intentionally trying to support racist claims. But how much does intention matter?

Angela Saini

Well, so the Human Genome Diversity Project was kind of an offshoot of population genetics. And we have to remember here that population genetics itself was a response to the eugenics establishment. So before WWII, there were eugenics labs everywhere, Cold Spring Harbor had one, there was one at University College London where the eugenics project started. But after the war of course that became very unfashionable. And so a lot of eugenicists or race scientists as they would have been called completely innocuously before WWII began to re-version themselves, rehabilitate themselves as geneticists, population geneticists. And this was a very left wing group of people at the beginning. So they were very much opposed to racism, many of them had experienced the horrors of what had happened during WWII and wanted to leave that behind. But the science of human difference was so deeply rooted in this idea of human difference at the population level, it was very difficult to do that in a whole scale way.

So what you get with the Human Genome Diversity Project is an attempt to map human variation in a way that for all intents and purposes looks very much like old fashioned race science. It's looking for genetic differences between populations, they won't call them races but they essentially are races that they're looking at. Or large population groups which is essentially the same thing. And so it was fraught from the beginning, it had a lot of opposition from indigenous groups particularly because the project was all about going to these small isolated communities around the world in the belief that they might be genetically exceptional in some way. None of them were but in their imagination they hoped that they could pinpoint something genetically special about these isolated groups. And of course these isolated groups were not fans of this, they had learned over the centuries not to fully trust western scientists coming in and trying to take their genetic material or their biological material. So there was a lot of pushback on that front.

But also conceptually, as social scientists have been at pains to point out, there were those flaws from the beginning, that they didn't really resolve, this group of anti racists within science hadn't fully resolved why what they were doing was not really race science. In the end it didn't really go anywhere. But what did come out of that project more broadly was ancestry testing. So modern day ancestry testing really is a product of that movement within population genetics. And of course ancestry testing has only reaffirmed in the public imagination this idea that race must be real because then how else can you take a DNA test and it tell you where you're from?

Erin Welsh

All right. We are going to take a quick break here and when we get back, there's still plenty to talk about.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

Welcome back, everyone. Let's get back into it. In your book you talk about how race science is still conducted by two primary groups, these well meaning anti racist scientists whose research nevertheless perpetuates the notion that race has a biological foundation. And then the racial realists, the quote unquote "racial realists" who exploit scientific language to disguise themselves as legitimate scholars when they are really just using pseudoscientific journals to promote racist views. What role do each of these groups play when it comes to race science today?

Angela Saini

Rather than two groups, I think it's more useful to think about it as a spectrum because yes, there are those on the very far fringes, the pseudoscientific fringes of academia with maybe one foot in academia and most of their time just blogging on these far right blogs or with their YouTube channels and producing kind of these pseudoscientific papers for pseudoscientific journals. And they are very much allied to the far right. Their ideologies and beliefs are straight out of the 19th century. There is no real difference between what they say and what they believed in the 19th century.

But mainstream science to some degree I think still has this commitment to race which plays out in far more subtle ways usually. I mean there are some firmly within mainstream academia who give a lot of space to those on the fringes. So I wouldn't say that they're necessarily anti racist, they will say probably that they're apolitical, that they are just driven by curiosity or that they have no political skin in the game, they're just interested. But for some reason they give a lot of space to those on the far right. And in fact I just published a piece recently in Undark about mainstream scientific journals and how much overlap there is between the people who write for them and the people on these racist fringes. And there's far more than you would imagine.

But then there are also mainstream scientists who are committed to anti racism, who very much believe in the need to move on and really make a break from those mistakes of the past and the pseudoscience of the past. But for some reason still keep coming back to race as a guiding principle in the way that they think about human difference. And you see this particularly in medicine. So for example, in recent years we've had a lot of calls from very well intentioned people in medical research and clinical research asking for more people of color to take part in clinical trials. And sometimes this bleeds into this claim that drugs tested on white people might not work in black and brown people which is absolute nonsense. Of course that's not true. If it were, we would have real problems right now when we went to the doctor.



But there is this problematic kind of space in which we want diversity in clinical trials of course because there is such a huge degree of individual difference between us, it's good to be able to map that in as broad a way as possible. And to some degree calling for people from different ethnicities can feel like a way of achieving some of that diversity. But the truth is if you have a large enough group of people, it doesn't really matter what race they are as long as there is enough of them. And that sometimes gets lost in that messaging. So we need to be very careful I think about the way that we talk about race in science. And this is something I often say to researchers when I do talks at universities or when I've spoken at the NIH is every time you use race, ask yourself why you are using it and what you think race means in that context. How are you defining it? It's astonishing to me how many papers I read that don't go through that essential first step.

Erin Welsh

As you point out, the implication of many behavioral genetic studies looking at racial differences in traits such as intelligence is that if there is a biological difference, then social programs would fail. What are some of the inherent issues with studies like this and who benefits from them? Who wants to draw that conclusion?

Angela Saini

There's always been this claim, and this goes back to at least before the eugenics era, that no amount of affirmative action or trying to fix society's problems when it comes to racial inequality will work because deep down we are just fundamentally different. And this is why this grift continues into the present is because there are so many people still invested in this idea that racial difference at the psychological or intellectual level is so real that we will never really overcome it, that when we look and see these racial disparities for example in American society that that is something that we'll never be overcome because that just reflects nature. And that's again a very self serving argument. It's an argument for doing nothing, for not changing anything. And it's very ahistorical because of course if you look at any group of people that has been designated and then deliberately oppressed for centuries and deliberately disadvantaged and then overlay on that the legacy of prejudice created by those myths, pseudoscientific myths and centuries of disadvantage, of course society is going to look the way it does. Of course. How can it look any different?

But that kind of lazy pseudoscientific approach to explaining inequality is still there. You see it in for example, in Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's 'The Bell Curve' which is still popular, which people still cite and still read. You see it in more subtle ways sometimes in the literature and education, for instance. How do we solve educational disadvantage? We haven't completely got rid of that yet. But what I would say to people, and this is what people like W. E. B. Du Bois said, when everyone is treated fairly, when you have really extended that hand of opportunity to absolutely everyone in as fair a way as you can and you still see difference, then perhaps you can come back and start complaining about it. But you can't do that right now.

Erin Welsh

Yeah. How is a journal like Mankind Quarterly benefiting from this harmful notion that scientists and the science is objective and that whatever scientists conclude from research is Truth with a capital T?

Angela Saini

Well the Mankind Quarterly was a journal that appeared in the 1960s after WWII and it was a reaction to the fact that race science was moving out of science because it was seen as illogical and pseudoscientific by this point, it was completely unfashionable to be a race scientist after WWII. But there were a number of academics around the world who were still committed to it, who very much still thought that maybe we weren't one species, that we were different species or subspecies or breeds, and that racial mixing was somehow dangerous to society, that would create these strange hybrid people which I know sounds absolutely bizarre now but was an actual fear that some people had less than a century ago. And so they created a journal of their own. It was called the Mankind Quarterly. It was funded by a very wealthy segregationist, Wickliffe Draper, an American man who had inherited his wealth and invested it in the segregationist cause.

And one of the planks of this was to fund racists within science and academia who shared his views who could then be used as a kind of intellectual force with which to convince conservatives that desegregation was a mistake. And that's exactly what the Mankind Quarterly was for. Wickliffe Draper distributed it to prominent conservatives in the US. And some of the people who wrote for it were in the early days quite prominent scientists. There was Henry Garrett who was a very well known and distinguished psychologist who argued that racial mixing was deadly, that it was dangerous to society. There was a lot of overlap between this community who wrote for it and right wing, far right wing politicians and figures in the segregationist movement and white supremacist movement. And there were calls for it to be shut down even at the time. The journal was reviewed in mainstream scientific journals and found to be complete nonsense. People asked for it to be shut down, it wasn't shut down because like I said it was independently funded. And in fact it's still in publication today.

And that's the thing that people find absolutely impossible to understand is how something like this can still be circulated today. That's not to say it's widely read but it is there and it certainly has influence on the far right. Many of the people who write for it or who have written for it also provide intellectual ballast, if you want to call it that, for some of the most horrific right wing ideologies that we have. And they are cited. They were cited by the man who killed 10 black people at a supermarket in Buffalo just last year. If you read his manifesto, there are scientific article after scientific article cited there and many of those people have written for the Mankind Quarterly.

Erin Welsh

It is, yeah, shocking and disturbing that it still exists and is still popular and like you said, published by people who have a foot in both academia and publish in legitimate scientific journals but also things like Mankind Quarterly. So you mentioned how a lot of biomedical studies still use race as a category that they want to measure something by even though that something may be unclear. And in your book you wrote about the hypertension drug BiDil. Where does this drug fit into the growing problem of racialized medicine?

Angela Saini

BiDil was one of the first, and as far as I'm aware the only, still is the only drug approved by the FDA for marketing to black patients only. So it's a racially specific drug, at least in marketing terms, which is unprecedented. And the reason for that, it has a very long back story. And in fact there are some very good books by Jonathan Kahn and Dorothy Roberts that kind of go into this story in much more detail. But I interviewed the inventor of BiDil for my book and he admitted quite happily that BiDil works on everyone, it's not that it works better on black people.

It was just a complete act of expediency that it was much cheaper and cost effective to test only on black people. And because in America, rates of hypertension are much higher among black Americans, they did it that way. There's no logic, there's no scientific logic behind it. And in fact he himself prescribes it to white and black patients, he doesn't discriminate in the way that he prescribes it. There has long been this correlation between being black in America and having higher hypertension. But there is no genetic basis to it, at least that's not what studies have found. And a lot of money has gone into looking for genetic explanations for this.

It is most likely associated with social factors. High blood pressure or persistently high blood pressure which is what hypertension is, you see all over the world, millions of people around the world have it. My mother has it. This is a common condition and it's caused most often by high salt in the diet which is why the highest rates in the world are seen in Finland and Germany, once adjusted for other factors. And of course in Finland and Germany diets tend to be very high in salty meat and fish. It's also caused by stress. People have shown that higher blood pressure is associated with fewer years of education, with being an immigrant. So there are lots of factors that contribute to high blood pressure and of course stress and racial discrimination are one of them.

But this kind of desperation to prove a racial genetic underpinning to hypertension is just the most fascinating story. And it just shows I think it's emblematic of the ways in which race can be invoked in medicine in inappropriate ways but just continue over time until it becomes myth, until it becomes dogma. And even now that dogma is so deeply rooted that in the UK the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which is the body that advises doctors on how to treat patients, still advises different drugs if you're under 50, if you're black than if you're white. And there is no scientific basis for that, I should add. There was a study done in 2021, this is after my book came out, that showed that there is no logic, there's no evidence basis for prescribing different drugs based on ethnicity.

Erin Welsh

Since your book came out, have you seen any examples of racialized medicine or racialized discussions or language involving racialized differences in terms of COVID in popular media?

Angela Saini

Absolutely. I mean at the beginning of the pandemic there was a lot of speculation, you might remember this in the panic in the kind of absence of scientific evidence which we really didn't know anything at the end of 2019 and early 2020, we really knew so little about this virus. And there was a lot of speculation about the possibility that certain races couldn't catch COVID. And then later in April or May, I remember I was in the UK then, I was still living in the UK, and rates were very high among Asian people living in Britain. So this is usually in Britain that refers to South Asian, so from the South Asian subcontinent. And people started speculating about whether South Asian people were uniquely susceptible to this virus. But of course you only had to look at the demographics to understand why that was, it was because the virus hit London first.

London is a minority white British city. So demographically it does not look like the same as the rest of the UK and the majority of or a disproportionate number of front line workers in London come from ethnic minority or immigrant backgrounds. Not to mention the fact that the NHS, which is where a number of those deaths happened among doctors and nurses, is disproportionately staffed by ethnic minorities. So of course the figures are not going to look the same. And that's leaving aside the fact that race impacts health on so many different levels which we can see for ourselves for example in the fact that, we should have known this already, that in the US black Americans have a lower life expectancy than white Americans. Not in any way because they are somehow uniquely biologically disadvantaged but just because of the way we live, the way people are treated, for the same reason that poor people around the world have a lower life expectancy of course because of the lives that they live and the way that they are treated.

And why those social explanations for the differences weren't brought in sooner, why I had to endure, well we all had to endure serious scientists and physicians making these ridiculous claims in those early months of the pandemic which did enormous damage to people. Because later on when the vaccine came out, ethnic minority groups were nervous about taking the vaccine because they felt that a vaccine tested on white people wouldn't necessarily work on them. I had emails with people asking me that which is absolutely nonsensical but of course that ridiculous speculation on the part of scientists and doctors for the two years prior had fed into that.

Erin Welsh

Yeah, of course. Since publishing 'Superior', have you received any pushback either from population geneticists studying humans or from race realists?

Angela Saini

Well the race realists still won't leave me alone. One of the reasons I'm not on Twitter or Facebook anymore, I left Twitter a few years ago. The degree of trolling I was getting was just unbearable and it wasn't just me. Maybe I'm very thin skinned, I probably am, but I just couldn't handle it anymore. It was just incessant. I couldn't write anything, I couldn't do anything. They published all the personal details of my family, including my son who was just a kid, he's 9 years old now but he was 7 or 8 then. And it was just I couldn't bear it. So I had to just distance myself. I took down any pictures of him, I try and keep a minimal presence on social media now.

And it's a very difficult thing to deal with because of course as a freelance journalist your only currency is your reputation. And I still worry sometimes that people who don't know any better, they will see these things that they write online and they will believe them about me, that I'm compromised in some way, that I'm some kind of left wing stooge who is just peddling these... They call me a pseudoscientist, these scientific racists online, pseudoscientists online.

And that is a hard thing to deal with as a freelancer. And it's not just me, there are many of us who deal with that every single day. So that really doesn't stop. And I hope people can see through that now, I hope people are more aware of their tactics and the way they operate. And in fact at the end of 2019, because of all of this, I started a group which now sits under Royal Institution in London called Challenging Pseudoscience. So I brought together scientists, academics, policymakers, social media experts, people who work in the misinformation space, counterterrorism experts, and we as an informal group, none of us get paid, we have quite a bit of funding but none of us get paid, and we commission projects around scientific misinformation and disinformation.

We commissioned some research last year on antivaxxers, there's some really detailed ethnographic research on antivaxxers and how they work and we run public events. And I hope that we're making some traction there. I mean that's my way of kind of making a difference in this space is just to help clean up the wild west that the internet has become when it comes to these kind of ridiculous pseudoscientific conspiracy theories. And I hope that ultimately we can create a system, if not a regulation which I would certainly hope for, but at least a return to some kind of civil discourse online which is informed by a factual good faith information, not what we have at the moment.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

Angela, thanks again so much for taking the time to chat with me. I really enjoyed our conversation. If you also liked this interview and want to learn more, check out our website [thispodcastwillkillyou.com](http://thispodcastwillkillyou.com) where I'll post a link to where you can find 'Superior: The Return of Race Science' along with a link to Angela's new book, 'The Patriarchs: How Men Came to Rule' which sounds super fascinating, on my to read list as of today. And don't forget you can check out our website for all sorts of other cool things including but not limited to transcripts, quarantine and placebo recipes, show notes and references for all of our episodes, links to merch, our [bookshop.org](http://bookshop.org) affiliate account, our Goodreads list, a firsthand account form, and music by Bloodmobile.

Speaking of which, thank you to Bloodmobile for providing the music for this episode and all of our episodes. Thank you to Lianna Squillace for our audio mixing. And thanks to you, listeners, for listening. I hope you liked this bonus episode and are loving being part of the TPWKY Book Club. A special thank you as always to our fantastic patrons, we appreciate your support so, so very much. Okay. Until next time, keep washing those hands.