

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Dale Bennett

INCITE

Columbia University

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Dale Bennett conducted by Whitney Dow on September 30, 2107. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Dale Bennett

Location: Battle Creek, MI

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: September 30, 2017

Q: So, can you tell me your name, where you're from, what you do, and a little bit about yourself?

Bennett: Okay.

Q: So, tell me about the weird parts of you.

Bennett: [01:23:32:36] Got a lot of those. My name is Dale Bennett. I was born Dale Cook [phonetic], in Wilksburg, Pennsylvania, which was a lower-middle class suburb, as they called them, burrows, in Pittsburg. My mother was from Uniontown, Pennsylvania, and she was pulled out of school as nearly as I can tell by the end of eighth grade by her stepmother, who started sending her out as a maid. She wound up being a maid for a childhood friend of my grandmother's, and she was the wife of the president of Pittsburg Plate Glass. So, she would borrow my mother every once in a while, and finally, she hired her altogether. And then she lent her out from time to time to my grandmother, who had gone to school with her, to clean the house, because my grandmother was not good at that. And my father married the maid, my mother. And they were married for four years before anybody knew about it.

My father was drafted in World War II in the end of 1942, when my mother was just pregnant. So she moved back to Battle Creek to be with her mother, who had abandoned the family when my mother was a kid. And that's how I came to live in Battle Creek. My mother was a divorced woman working nights as a waitress, and she taught me to read. From the time I was two years old, she'd sit me on her lap and read to me, with her finger going across the lines. By the time I was four, I was reading books that I'd never seen, to her. That's how I went to college.

My first day in kindergarten, the teacher caught me in the library corner reading a book to the other kids. So, she took me down to the library and got me a library card. And after that, because my mother was working nights and was alone, she did what was called boarding out. It was informal foster care. She'd pay people to keep me and she'd come home and take me with her on the weekends.

I got a head start in school and by the end, I was determined to go to college. I had two stepsisters, a stepbrother, and a half-brother. None of them finished high school. They dropped out between the age of fourteen and seventeen. But because my mother read to me, I was always determined to go to college.

In my family it was like I said I wanted to run away with the circus. So, I just started travelling to big cities looking for a job, and some way to go to college. I was in Detroit for a while. Then I went to San Francisco because I heard that in California, if you were a resident for six months, you got free college tuition. I got there right after [Timothy] Leary and [Richard] Alpert. So,

everybody my age was stoned all the time. I didn't last six months. I couldn't handle it. So, a friend gave me a plane ticket to New York.

I moved to New York, got a job as a secretary in a small publishing company, and after about a year, found out that if I got a job at a university, I could get free tuition. I got a job at Columbia. Started taking night classes. Married a graduate student, and wound up with a scholarship to general studies. We took time out, because he was doing his dissertation in Chile, so I lived in Chile for a year and three months. We came back, I started school full-time. He discovered the sexual revolution and we got divorced. And I'd lied. I had taken college classes every place I'd gone —Detroit, and I took one in San Francisco, although I didn't finish it, and I kept doing this while I was in New York. And Columbia didn't allow any of them for transfer credit because they didn't match exactly the courses they had except for one, on revolutions in the twentieth century.

Well, I took a Junior/Senior seminar when I was still technically a second-semester freshman in terms of credits. So a professor walked up to me, I was an editor on the newspaper, and he walked up to me at an editorial meeting. We're sitting on the lawn, it was early fall. He said, "Dale, I want to let you know I nominated you for a Wilson." I said, "What's a Wilson?" He says, "It's a graduate fellowship, and you're going to get it." And I said, "Don't you have to be a senior?" He said, "Well, you took my Junior/Senior seminar." I said, "I wasn't a Junior when I took it." He said, "Were you a sophomore?" I said, "No." He said, "You took my course as a freshman?" I said, "Yes," and started crying. And he took me by the arm and dragged me up to the Dean, I'm blubbering and sobbing. And, he said, "I want to see the Dean, now." Everybody

was very confused in the office, but they let me in. So, he said, “Sit down” and he pointed to the chair in front of the Dean. And I’m sitting there, waiting to have my scholarship pulled. And he said, “I’ve nominated her for a Wilson, she’s going to get it. You figure out how she’s going to graduate.”

So, in that semester, in that summer, I finished college. [laughs] I graduated Phi Bet [Phi Beta Kappa], cum laude, and I got a fellowship to Yale. [coughs] It’s hard to say, because I hated Yale. [laughs] And the minute I got there, I knew I’d made a mistake. But I stuck it out for a couple of years.

And with my second husband, who was a scientist with IBM [International Business Machines]. They were working on the Great Hadron Collider; he was a mathematician on that before it got built so we were spending our summers in Paris. And I sent them a telegram from Paris, saying, “I’m not going to come back to school, because I don’t want to be a professor when I grow up.”

So, I spent a year figuring out what to do, and I went to journalism school. And I started working for newspapers, and I did that until the second husband took off. At which point, I started working for IBM, because I was raising a nephew from his side of the family, who’d been abandoned, until he finished high school. He’d abandoned, and I wanted to stick with him until he finished high school, because I knew what was waiting for him.

I wound up coming back to Battle Creek. I became a deacon, I got very involved in the Episcopal Church, and right after I was ordained a deacon, my mother died. Also, I had a job. I’d set up

something called the Walk-In Ministry for panhandlers. We had a bunch of volunteers. We had particular things we could do, with rules, like, one month's rent or one mortgage payment a year. And at the end of the year, they called me in, and they said, "Oh, this is so wonderful. You've done such a good job. We're going to go all volunteer." "Wait a minute. I'm the only paid employee, right?" And they said, "Yes, and we'd love to have you stay." So, my mother died, I inherited a paid-for house, and moved to Battle Creek.

So, that's just kind of the background, here.

Q: What motivated you to get involved in non-profit?

Bennett: [01:26:55:07] Well, first, I was attracted by Columbia. I have a soft spot in my heart for Columbia. But also, I thought it was a very interesting project, because I don't know a lot about survey research, but I haven't heard of a lot of surveys where they interview white people and black people, and see what you get when you put them together. I like that. And, I have a pretty unusual point-of-view, just because of the way I grew up. Because basically, I'm an expert at not fitting in anywhere. So, that interested me, too.

Q: So, as someone who has an interesting point of view, how do you think about [interruption] your race and your whiteness?

Bennett: [01:27:19:20] I've never particularly thought about it, but not—I think, if you're white, you typically don't think about it. But with me, it's because my experiences had been so varied.

For instance, by the time I finished third grade, I had been to something like seven or eight schools. I changed schools seven or eight times, sometimes the school I'd been in a couple of years before. Because I was living with people — it wasn't always in Battle Creek. I lived in Charlotte [phonetic], I lived in Hastings, I lived in Vermontville. One room schools, all kinds of schools. But what I found, I think the unique experience I had about race, was there weren't a lot of mixed schools in those days, but I lived in poor neighborhoods. So more than most kids going to school in the early '50s, which is when I was in elementary schools, I wound up in schools with African American students. And whenever I was in a school like that, the white kids had already formed their little groups, and I was outside them. The black kids welcomed me. They were friendly to me, they'd play with me, they'd visit me at home. I'd go to their houses. Don't think it made me any less stupid about race than any other average white person. But, I did learn one thing that's been important to me. I never was afraid of people because they were black.

There was one time, at Columbia, when I was married to the professor, we lived on Tiemann Place, which is really 124<sup>th</sup> Street. It's a short block, it goes up to Grant's Tomb, and that other half block is 125<sup>th</sup> Street. So, we were in Harlem. And the building, most of the neighborhood was white. It was Morningside Heights. But the building was mixed, very mixed. And I was walking home from the library one night. I had an exam in the morning, I'd been studying. The library closed, I think, at eleven, and it was about a fifteen-minute walk. So, I was walking home down the hill, and there were these three or four young black men sitting on our stoop. [pauses] No, the stoop before mine. And in New York, if men make catcalls, you just ignore it. I've heard more anatomically impossible things proposed by answering them than I ever wanted to hear again. [laughs] So, I just did my New York thing. I was just walking past, and all of a sudden,

the tallest of them jumped up and stood in front of me, and he said, “Hey white girl. How come you too good to talk to us?” And I thought, uh-oh. And I thought, and I said, “Oh, were you talking to me?” And they looked around, and said, “Well, who the hell did you think we were talking to?” I said, “Well, you know, I wondered. But, I’m not white.” They said, “What are you?” I said, “Oh, I’m a kind of yellow-ish pink.” They broke out laughing, insisted I sit down and have a beer with them, and, [laughs] it turned into a really pleasant half-hour. I told them I had to go back, because I had an exam in the morning.

And it was because of the kids I went to school with. Because, my first reaction wasn’t to scream or be fearful. I thought whoops, and I figured out what to do. And for six months after that, every now and then I’d be walking between Tiemann Place and the campus, and I’d hear somebody call out, “Hey, Pinky!” And I knew it was them or somebody they’d told.

I think fear is a big factor in people’s defensiveness about race. Because I have since learned that black men expect to be answered, not out of any kind of dominance, but because if they talk to somebody on the street, anybody, they expect an answer. That’s the social interaction. Which is not your typical white, sort of middle class or lower-class or any class response, when strangers say something potentially provocative to you. So, I’m kind of—it’s nothing I did. Personally, it’s nothing I decided to do. But, it happened because of my childhood experiences.

Q: What year did you move to Battle Creek?

Bennett: When did I what?

Q: When did you move to Battle Creek?

Bennett: [01:29:31:21] Well, let's see, I came back in, let's see, it was '84.

Q: And, what was the racial environment like in Battle Creek in '84, and how is it different than it is now?

Bennett: [01:29:40:06] In Battle Creek, I wasn't specifically aware of the racial environment, except for the fact that I thought a lot of kids were very stupid. I had some black friends in high school. Most of the white kids didn't. They were kids that I—who were in the college-prep track. So, I knew them, but it was a very small group. So most of the students in the school, black students, I didn't really interact with. But that was a class thing. The college-prep kids just did not run in the same social circles as the non-college-prep kids. Central was a big academic powerhouse then. We sent a kid or two to the Ivy's every year. And that was the crowd I ran in, although they always found me weird. Everybody found me weird. [laughs] Some of them found me engagingly weird. And some of them just found me plain weird. But I was used to that.

Because I had been so much on my own as a kid, I remember one day, I took a school bus. I lived out in Level Park [Battle Creek], which is a G.I. [Government Issue] Bill suburb, two-bedroom houses with a garage, almost to the county line. That's where I went to high school from. And I rode the school bus, and the skirts, they called them straight skirts, and they had a little slit. But, the bus steps were very high. And by climbing the steps I'd bust the pleat, the kick-pleat. And I couldn't afford to keep replacing clothes. We didn't have a lot of money. So,

the skirts at that time were sort of mid-calf. So, I shortened my skirt so they were just below the knee, and I could get on the school bus. Well, that was scandalous. “Oh, she’s trying to show off her legs.” I didn’t care. I didn’t care. I just didn’t want to have to keep replacing my skirts. So, I was that kind of kid.

I had been an outsider for so long, that people would insult me, and I didn’t notice. [laughs] And, I was fine with that, even after I figured it out. Because, Battle Creek in those days, people who worked at Kellogg’s or one of the other factories, they’d say “My manager” the way a four-year-old says “My daddy”.

I heard one of my teachers talking to another teacher during the change of classes in the hall, describe [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, and I’d done enough reading in history to be a big fan of Roosevelt as a poor kid. I heard him describe another teacher as a communist, and the teacher he was talking to said, “A communist? Why do you say that?” He said, “He voted for F.D.R. in 1936.” And I thought, “Oh, my god, I’ve got to get out of this place.” And I did. As soon as the police wouldn’t bring me back, I left.

When I came back to Battle Creek, the factories were mostly gone. Jobs were scarce, wages weren’t as high. And people had stopped being company androids...because the company had let them down. And, I found it a harder place to make a living. But in my estimation at least, a better place to live. People were more open. And I love the people here. I love being here. And if you’d told me when I was seventeen I would have said that, I would have called you a liar or just rolled on the floor laughing.

Q: What do you know about the people here?

Bennett: [01:31:25:30] The people are freer to be who they are. And I had not realized what a repressed town—I mean, I knew it was a repressed town, but teenagers always think that they're being repressed, so [laughs]. And I knew that, so I'd taken it with a grain of salt, until I moved back. I'm a deacon at the Episcopal Church. I never would have dared go to the Episcopal Church. That's where the rich kids took dancing lessons. And in high school, I was good friends with a couple of the rich kids, but I never mistook myself for someone who was part of their circle. And I just don't see that in Battle Creek anymore.

Because I think, one of the reasons for people's racial timidity, for white people's racial timidity, has always been what other people will think if they don't behave the way everybody else does with black people. And that's broken down, to a large extent, from what it was when I was in Battle Creek.

The churches are still largely segregated. In fact, very segregated. We have a couple of black members. We used to have more, but their children have either stopped going to churches or started going to African American churches. And like a lot of the white mainline protestant churches, we have a whole lot more funerals than we do baptisms. Because of the part the churches have played in the power structure. I don't think most of the churches ever deliberately did it, but just by who's there, and who's not there, it speaks volumes.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your relationship to your own race. How often do you think about your whiteness and your race?

Bennett: [01:32:23:47] I really don't think about it except when I'm dealing specifically with black people.

Q: Can you put my question into your answer?

Bennett: I'm sorry?

Q: Can you put my question into your answer? How often do you think about your own race?

Bennett: Not often.

Q: But, say, like, "I don't think about—"

Bennett: [01:32:32:27] Oh, I don't think about it often.

Q: You don't think about your own race often.

Bennett: [01:32:34:30] I don't think about race often, except in the occasions when I am dealing with black people. Which is something I make an effort to do. Right now, I'm working on the

initiative to eliminate gerrymandering. And there are a couple of black churches that I make it a habit of attending a couple of times a year.

It started at our last Episcopal convention. We're one of the two founders, along with the Methodist Church, or the A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] Zion Church, which is a large African American denomination. And at our last convention, which was three years ago, I think, we had a large—I wasn't there, but I heard about it—we had a large group of the—it was in Texas—of the A.M.E. people show up at the church and demand that we apologize for our refusal to take a stand on race. Which, the Episcopal church was very slow to do, even after the Civil Rights Movement started, the northern church, although it strongly supported it privately, did not take a stand in the denomination on it, because we didn't want to split with the southern church. And, so they demanded that someone, a clergy person from every Episcopal Church in the country go apologize on the anniversary of the founding of the A.M.E. Zion church. And our priest had two services to do. He asked me if I'd do it, so I did.

And I went, and I was not nervous about doing it. I thought it was the right thing to do. But I was a little flummoxed about what to say. So, I said "They're right. We have been historically clueless about it, we have missed many opportunities to do the right thing," and I said, "But we are learning."

And, I told them about one of our recent saints, Jonathan Myrick Daniels who, during the Civil Rights struggle in the '60s, I think it was in '68—I don't know the year exactly, I don't have it in my mind—but, he had gone for a voter registration drive, in the summer, in, I believe it was

Mississippi [Hayneville, Alabama]. And they were having voter registration in one of the cities, and he and the four people he was with, in the small group that was doing that second voters, they got arrested. It was like ten o'clock in the morning. And they took them to this small town they'd never been in before, they put them in police cars. At four thirty in the afternoon, they let them out. Before cellphones. Nobody knew where they were. It was a dangerous situation. And, he was—they were thirsty, so there was a little country store there. And they were going up the steps to get something cold to drink, and to use the payphone to tell people where they were and come pick them up. And he saw a man standing at the side, a deputy with a shotgun. And he cocked the shotgun, and put his finger on the trigger. Well, there was this young black woman, a teenager, in front of him going up the steps and the guy was aiming at her. He pushed her down, and he took the shot. And he became an Episcopal Saint for that. That young woman went to seminary, became a theologian, and has continued the work.

And I told them that story, and I said, "We're still getting it all wrong, but we're learning. And we need your help. I'm asking for it." And I go back there frequently. I'm planning to go this week, because I'm working on a petition drive to end gerrymandering, and I'm going to go ask the priest permission. What I'd like to do is get some of the members of the congregation trained to do this, instead of me signing them up, but it will depend on what happens in my talk with the priest.

So, that's how I'm trying to help. I don't know how much help it is. But it's something I feel called to do.

Q: Why do you think that the only time you think about your race is when you deal with people who are black?

Bennett: [01:34:39:46] That's an interesting question. [pauses] I mean, well—I address it in sermons. I address race and class a lot. And the congregation knows how I feel. I think most of them agree with me. I've never had anybody say, "You know, why do you talk about that so much?" And people, I thought, from the way they sit there like this [crosses arms] while I'm preaching, wished I'd quit. Every now and then, one will come up to me and say, "I really liked that sermon."

I don't see my job as a deacon—well, I know my job as a deacon is not to tell people what they ought to do. My job is to set an example and to speak to people in ways that they can hear. And, you never know, unless somebody comes up and tells you what they're hearing.

So, maybe I could do more. But what I don't want to do is become, "Oh, goody, we're going to get another diatribe about race," when I walk into coffee hour.

Q: Well, that's not so much talking to other people. I'm thinking about yourself. Why do you think, as white people, [pauses] we only think about it when we're confronted with people who are black, or we talk to them? I'm just wondering, on your day-to-day life, passing through your life, going to the store, driving your car somewhere, why do you think it's something that doesn't often occur to you? Do you think that if you were black, you would think more about your race on a day-to-day basis?

Bennett: [01:35:26:53] I think if I were black, I'd have to. I mean, I wouldn't have a choice. There are small things I do. Like, I had to renew my driver's license. Not driver's license, but registration. I did it yesterday. And when I'm in a situation like that, I will usually go and sit where a cluster of black people is sitting and start a conversation. Because it's a natural way to do it. And I've had some wonderful conversations that way about—I was talking to a grandmother yesterday, she was there for a license, and she was there with her six-month-old grandson, who was a wonderful kid, and she was very proud of him. We spent a lot of time talking about her grandson.

So, I have opportunities to do it. But in the ordinary course, my neighborhood is all white. We did have a black woman who lived there, she was a good friend. But she died in April. And there are no other black people in the neighborhood.

I guess first of all, I mean, you may not know it from talking to me, but I'm an introvert. [laughs] I really am. I'm a mouthy introvert. And it's very hard for me to go up to people and just sort of start a conversation that doesn't sound stupid. But I really think that the core of what needs to be done, needs to be done with white people. Because I don't feel as if I can tell African Americans what they need to do, or what I can do for them. Both of those would strike me as very condescending.

I'm there. I do my best to act like I'm there. But I'm very careful not to do anything that could be construed as telling them what they need to do.

Q: Is there something specific that you thought would be important to talk about when you came here, that you wanted to sort of put into the record?

Bennett: [01:36:44:27] I think the thing I most wanted to say was I have seen how much better a town, in human terms, Battle Creek is now that it is no longer a rich town, a prosperous town, a town where people have to behave in a certain way, or they're going to be ostracized. We used to be such a smug little city. Such a smug little white city. There was a thriving African American community here, I mean, there were African Americans who had jobs because there were jobs around and they were decent jobs, and there were African American kids who went to college. We were not living in a time of required segregation. But there were also a lot of good kids who fell by the wayside because of a lack of income by the family, because the teachers didn't—I mean, I was taken out of the college-prep track when I was in the advanced English class, because as a poor white kid, I didn't always have my homework done, my baby brother actually tore my homework up twice. [laughs] And, the teacher just decided I wasn't college material.

So when I went into high school, all of a sudden, I discovered that I was in all these non-college-prep courses, and I demanded to be put back into college prep, and I was. But by that time I was so weird, and I had such a strong sense of who I was, and who I was going to be, that nothing was going to stop me. I don't think that's something that, A.) most kids would have thought to do, or that, B.) their parents would have allowed them to do, if they were black. Because in the racial climate of those days, it was dangerous.

Q: Do you think that people would agree with you that Battle Creek is a better town now that it's poor?

Bennett: [01:37:46:35] You know, I've never had anybody disagree with me, but I've had people look at me like I was nuts. [laughs] When you're a deacon, and when you're generally an affable person, and I do have a reputation—I've had it my whole life, for being a little bit out there in what I think, for having a naturally curly mind. Which, I have had people who were in my high school class come up to me and say, "You know in high school, I was afraid of you." [laughs] "Afraid of me? Why?" "Well, you always acted like you knew what you were doing."

Well, I did know what I was doing. But I didn't expect anybody to notice, much less be afraid of me. Because I thought I was getting in under the radar. I wasn't. I'm too mouthy to be under the radar. [laughs] But it took me years to learn that.

Q: Are you happy that you're white?

Bennett: [01:38:13:53] I'm happy that I'm me. I really don't think about being white except when I'm in a situation with people who are not. [pauses] I know that if I had been black, I never could have pulled off what I pulled off about going to college, by going to college. I mean, I was competing with—they told me after they hired me that all of my competitors had been to the publishing program at Radcliffe College. And I said, "Why did you hire me?" And they said, "Because we thought you'd do the typing." [laughs] And if I had been black girl, that would not

have happened. It just wouldn't have. And I know that. So, it's not just because of who I am. It's also possible because of who I was not, and I'm aware of that.

Q: Being a woman or being white, which has had a bigger impact on your life?

Bennett: [01:38:44:00] The one I've been more aware of is being a woman. My family told me that the boys were going to go to college, I was going to drop out of school and have a baby by the time I was seventeen, which is what all the sisters did. And I said, "No, I'm not." They said, "Well, then you're useless and we're not going to worry about you." But, if I look at the world instead of me, being white was a great advantage.

Q: Would you voluntarily give up your whiteness?

Bennett: [01:39:00:00] I'm not sure what it would mean to give it up, but, yes. I mean, if people looked at me and thought I wasn't white, I don't think it would change my world that much now. Because I am so set in who I am. It would if I were forty years younger.

Q: And you said before that you really think that white people really need to talk to other white people.

Bennett: Yes. Yes.

Q: About whiteness. Why?

Bennett: [01:39:14:35] I think it's because [pauses]

Q: Can you work the question into the?

Bennett: [01:39:18:15] I think white people don't really realize they're white. It's [pauses] it's like the Eskimo saying, "What is this thing called 'snow'?" If you're always in it, if it's always in you, it's not something you think about. It's your given, it's the ground you walk on. I don't think anybody sets out to be white. They learn that's who they are. And I have a narrow window out, because I was in a class, as a kid. [pauses] Nobody ever said it to me, because I was too fierce, but I would hear poor white kids derided as being not really white. Not to their face, but other people. And, that—those actually were the kids who were the most racist. Both of those groups were the most racist. The poor ones, because they had the most to lose. The ones who were deriding them, because they were looking for a leg up in the hierarchy. And I think that's something that probably both groups were unaware of, when it was happening.

I remember my stepfather once. My best friends, when I was a senior in high school were—one was a Christian Scientist, another had a father who was a Free Methodist minister, one was a black debater, one was the only Jewish girl in the high school. Those were my best friends. And one day, my stepfather said to me, "Aren't any of your friends white?" [laughs] I was totally bewildered. But now I understand the question.

Q: Thank you so much for coming in and speaking with us. We want to take a few stills of you.

Bennett: Take a few what?

Q: Just take a few photographs of you.

Bennett: Oh, okay, let me blow my nose.

Q: No, no, just sit right there.

Bennett: No, I want to blow my nose.

Q: Oh. Right there, next to you.

Bennett: [blows nose] Okay. [silence as photos are taken]

Q: Don't smile, just relax your face. [silence] Great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]