

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Tanas Geleff

INCITE

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Tanas Geleff conducted by Whitney Dow on September 29th, 2017. 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: Tanas Geleff

Location: Battle Creek, MI

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: September 29th, 2017

Geleff: [03:10:45] Another guy came to our Tea Party meeting and originally, I saw it on Facebook. And he interviewed a guy named Joel Fulton who has been to our Tea Party meetings and he invited Sam and the other guy to a Tea Party meeting to try and talk to us, see if we would participate. And it was after that, because I was against it, at the beginning. But once I heard what they had to say, I went online and I took the survey and you guys picked me to be interviewed, so.

Q: Nice. Yeah, I like Joel a lot. He's a cool guy.

Geleff: Good man.

Q: He's a good man and I like him. He's really direct and he's also funny.

Geleff: Yeah.

Q: Yes. [laughs] He's always looking good—

Geleff: Loud too.

Q: I like, anybody who's carrying a gun who's laughing, I'm happy about.

Geleff: [Laughs] Me too.

Q: If you're armed, I want you to be smiling.

Geleff: And I feel safe too.

Q: Yeah, yeah. So, no, he's a good guy. Sam's actually gone over and gone shooting with him at the range. I haven't been over there yet, but I've been by it. [Interruption] OK so first of all, can you tell me your name, where you're from, what you do for a living, and a little about yourself?

Geleff: [03:11:27] My name is Tanas Geleff. I'm 56 years old. For the most part, I grew up here in Battle Creek. For the early part of my life I lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I'm a factory worker. I'm married. I have six children, one dog, and two cats.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like—you're exactly my age, so I know that era well. What was it like growing up in Battle Creek in the late '60s, early '70s? What was your neighborhood like, what was it like?

Geleff: [03:11:46] Your average childhood, you know. A lot of friends. When I was younger we didn't have a lot of money. Kind of poor. We made do with what we had.

Q: Because my voice will ultimately be on the tape, when I ask a question—just going forward—if you could put my question in a little bit. Meaning when I say, you know, "Where do you work?" And you say, "Kellogg's," you say, "I work at Kellogg's." Make it a complete sentence so it's not just an answer.

Geleff: OK.

Q: Can you describe a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in Battle Creek. Was it diverse? Was it mostly white? Was it working class? Was it upper class? What was the neighborhood like that you grew up in?

Geleff: [03:12:08] Well, there was a couple neighborhoods. The first one I lived in when we first moved out here was, I would say, 90 percent white. After a couple years we moved to another neighborhood and it was pretty—I would say probably 60 percent white, 40 percent other, you know, races. Got along with everybody. Didn't have no problems. And, do you need more?

Q: What was your family like? Were your parents together? You have brothers and sisters? Was it a very calm, quiet house? Was it a raucous house? What was it like when you were a child?

Geleff: [03:12:27] It was a pretty quiet house. Mom and Dad, they did the best with what they had. And I think they instilled a lot of values, good values in all of us. And one thing in particular my father told me, he always told me, he says, "You treat people the way you want to be treated and you'll do fine."

Q: When I grew up in Boston, because of bussing and everything, there was a lot of racial tension in the '70s when I grew up. What was it like? Were the same things going on here? Was Battle Creek like that in the '70s? Was there any racial tension around bussing or integration or anything like that?

Geleff: [03:12:48] Somewhat.

Q: Give me a full sentence, yeah.

Geleff: [03:12:49] Somewhat. I didn't notice it in junior high or elementary school. When you got up to high school it was a little bit more noticeable. You really didn't have the interactions with black people, Hispanics, that you did when you were younger. And I think that was probably because people kind of tended to hang out with their race.

Q: I had a similar experience growing up, that at lunch everyone sits in their own area. Do you remember thinking about that stuff as a child? I guess the question would be when did you, as a person, do you remember the first time you started thinking about race and your own race, in relation to others?

Geleff: [03:13:19] It was probably when it was more noticeable, when I got in high school. You do notice the separation, or at least I did there. Later on in life, I really don't think about it now because I try and live by what my father told me. Treat people the way you want to be treated.

And if you want to be treated with respect, that's the way you treat people. You want to be treated like crap, that's the way you treat people.

Q: I don't want to be treated like crap, so—

Geleff: No, I don't either.

Q: You say you're a factory worker. Can you tell me about the work you do, where you work, the type of work it is?

Geleff: [03:13:39] I work at a paper mill here in town. And I sit in an air-conditioned office and watch the process. We're a recycled paper mill, so it's kind of a green job. And I watch the cleaning process of the material coming in and send it on to make packaging or cereals and other materials that are boxed.

Q: Is it a union job? Are you in the union?

Geleff: Yes.

Q: So can you tell me a little bit about your relationship to the union. “I'm in the union, I've been there for a while,” what the union is and stuff?

Geleff: [03:13:59] I've been there for 37 years.

Q: Can you put my question in? "So I've been in the union for—"

Geleff: [03:14:02] I've been in the union for 37 years. For 10 of those 37 years, I was a union rep. And that was probably 20 years ago. We just recently got "Right to Work" here in Michigan and I was all for that because I feel that people shouldn't have to belong to a union to work at a place. Which, when I hired in down there, it did. That's what you had to do. [laughs] I don't know what else to say.

Q: That's interesting because I think a lot of people wonder sometimes the relationship between people who are in unions and the Right to Work movement. When you said that, you know, you had to join the union, what was the reason why you supported Right to Work despite the fact that you were in the union?

Geleff: [03:14:32] It comes from my political beliefs. I am pretty conservative in my political views. I've seen what goes on in the union. Being the union rep, I've seen that other side and yeah, I don't believe that you should have to belong to a union to work at a place. Now I do understand that sometimes it's probably a necessity because of the way the employer would treat you and I would hope that employers would treat their people decently but like I said, on the other hand, sometimes it's probably necessary to have a union represent you so you don't get screwed over too bad.

Q: I'm also in the union, in the Director's Guild. When you're getting paid what you're supposed to be getting paid, it's good. When they're taking a big chunk out of your paycheck for the dues and everything, it's not so good.

Geleff: Right.

Q: Coming back to why you want to participate in this project, you said originally you heard about the project at a meeting and then you were against it, and then you started thinking about it and you were forced—can you tell me a little bit about when you heard about the project why you were against it and then what were the reasons that you changed your mind? And what you're kind of hoping to add by participating?

Geleff: [03:15:15] Well, when I first heard about this, it was through our chairman of our local Tea Party. We discussed it. I'm on the board of directors at this local Tea Party and we discussed it at our meeting, whether to participate in it or not. And we felt that it really wasn't going to be in our interests because we are a little bit leery about academia and how they try and put a certain spin on the current politics of the day. And after that, Sam had gone to Joel Fulton and arranged through Joel Fulton to speak at our Tea Party meeting and let us know what this was all about. After I heard Sam and the guy that was with him speak at our meeting, I decided well, I'll check it out and see what it's about. And I went online and answered the survey, and I didn't see anything nefarious about what you guys are trying to accomplish here.

Q: Were there any specific things that you were hoping to communicate to the project when you saw what it was, about whiteness and about being a white American? Was there certain, anything you thought, “these are things that I don't often hear in the media or academia; I think I can represent this viewpoint well” — was there something specific?

Geleff: [03:16:06] The most specific thing that I think I'd like to see come out of it is that people of color realize that just because I'm white and I'm conservative, I'm not a racist. I try and take people at face value, OK? If you want to be low life to me, you're not going to get my respect. If you want to treat me like a human being, I'm going to give you respect. But I expect it in return.

Q: Do you feel that people of color, whatever their race, misunderstand white people?

Geleff: [03:16:26] For the most part, no. More than half, no. But I feel you've probably got a certain percentage that, for whatever reason—and I don't know if it's the people they listen to, how they were brought up, I don't know—but they feel like they're victims. I don't get where they get that from. I don't understand it.

Q: I think that as Americans we all kind of agree that we had some not so great things in the past about race—that there's slavery, Jim Crow laws, before the Civil Rights movement. You and I sitting here as middle-aged white men in 2017, do we owe black people anything, the people who are living now, because of things that have happened in the past?

Geleff: [03:16:54] No. You know, you'll see news stories of people saying they want reparations for slavery. You know what? You weren't a slave. You didn't pick cotton. That was your ancestors. We tried to correct that with the Civil War, with the Civil Rights movement, and I really feel that the opportunities that are available to you in this country, if you apply yourself there's no reason why you can't be anything you want to be. And there's plenty of examples out there. Thomas Sowell, Thomas Sowell's a great author and a great economist. Herman Cain, he ran for president back in 2012. I was going to vote for Herman Cain if he'd of got the nomination. Because he did it himself, he didn't ask somebody to do it for him.

Q: Do you think that in your life that—I guess let's start here. Can you describe a moment or a situation—and maybe it hasn't happened—that you became very aware of your race positively or negatively?

Geleff: [03:17:33] I really can't think of any one moment where that has happened. My parents tried to bring us up that race really doesn't matter. And like I said earlier, treat people the way you want to be treated. And I've got many black friends and most of them, I don't see a black guy sitting there. I see a person sitting there, a person I like, a person I have conversations with and joke with and so.

Q: And do you think that you received any benefits or that you've benefited any way over the course of your life by being white?

Geleff: [03:17:58] Not really. I don't see it. Now on the other hand, there was one specific thing that happened when I was a lot younger. I'll give you an example. They were interviewing for firefighters here in Battle Creek. And I went down, took the civil service test. And on the civil service test, if you were a woman they automatically added five points to your score. If you were black, you got another five points to your score. So I scored, I believe, a 78 on the civil service test. If you were a black woman and you scored a 71, your score came out 81 because they automatically added 10 points to your score. I wasn't too happy about that, but what are you going to do.

Q: Because that was actually going to be my next question. I always ask people, "Are there benefits to being white? Are there drawbacks to being white?" So that would be if I'd asked you that next question about the drawbacks to being white you would say, "This would be one of the drawbacks."

Geleff: [03:18:33] In a situation like that, yeah.

Q: What do you think is the motivation for a situation like that to happen?

Geleff: [03:18:39] The government trying to make up for all the wrongs in the past. That's what I attribute it to.

Q: How often, if ever, do you think about your race?

Geleff: [03:18:51] I really don't think about it. Seriously, I don't. I'm who I am. People can take me or leave for what I am. I really don't feel that race has anything to do with it.

Q: So what do you think that the potential value of a project like this, where we explore this idea of whiteness, if it's something that doesn't—I guess I'm trying to understand where you're coming from. If you thought it was interesting, enough to take the survey and come down and talk to us, what potential value could come out of something like this, do you think?

Geleff: [03:19:17] Just hoping that the races understand each other better. That we all need to get along. We're all in the same community. We need to try and find common ground to what we can agree on and build on it. Simple as that.

Q: And— [Interruption]. How's the time?

Geleff: We've got about 25 minutes.

Q: OK. And what about, can you tell me a little bit about your faith? Do you go to church, are you religious, is it something that's important to you in your life?

Geleff: [03:19:37] No. In my younger years I got heavily involved in church. I was saved. I accepted Christ into my life. But when I was 18 to 20 years old—I got married when I was 19 and took the family to church and stuff. And I was very involved in church. But it got to the point where I was doing so much, I kind of backed away from it. And I really haven't gone back

to it. I haven't been to church in 20 or 30 years, OK? But, I'm a Christian and I do feel the morals of the religion and I try and live by those. Am I perfect? No. Do I sin? Yes. But I know that when I die I'm going to heaven because I've accepted Christ in my life. I have to answer for what I've done while I've been here.

Q: I wanted to come back. One of the reasons we came, we were interested in Michigan, is that it seems to be sort of on the leading edge of a shift a little bit in the way a lot of white people think about themselves politically. I know that a lot of people, of course, were surprised that Michigan went Republican this time—

Geleff: Mhm.

Q: —And I was wondering—you know people talk about the election and talk about a lot of different things. They talk about is there a racial component? A lot of whites voted for the Republican nominee this time, more than voted for the Democratic. Do you think that there was a racial component in this election or not?

Geleff: If there was—

Q: Can you put the question in the answer?

Geleff: [03:20:32] I do believe there was a racial component to it and I think that racial component is that you saw more black people, a few more black people, vote for Trump, vote

Republican than they did in 2012, 2008 with Barack Obama being a black candidate in 2008. It was historic, OK? He got 97 or 98 percent of the black vote. Hillary Clinton didn't do so well. And I really feel that that was because over the last eight years I think some of the black population has come to realize that “the Democrats don't represent my values.” I truly believe that. And I've seen it from a couple people. Like, I'll talk to some of the guys at work, some of the black guys at work. And we'll be talking politics. And from what I'm hearing, they're more Republican than they are Democrat, they just don't realize it.

Q: And what about with Trump? I know that in the media there was a narrative—and there still is—that he's racist—

Geleff: Mhm.

Q: —You see that in the media all the time. Is that something created by the media? As someone who's clearly a thoughtful person—you know, you wouldn't be chairman of the Tea Party if you weren't serious about politics and think about a lot of things. Can you talk a little bit about—did you see any racial component, a negative racial component in any of Donald Trump's campaign? Or was that manufactured, do you think, by the media?

Geleff: [03:21:26] I think it was manufactured by the media. For the main reason—and I don't think it was just Democrats that helped the media manufacture that. I think it was establishment Republicans who did that because they're scared of him. Now I voted for him, but he wasn't my guy during the primary. I pretty much voted for him because it was a vote against Hillary. I

definitely didn't want her in there. But as far as him being a racist, I don't see it. I don't see it. I think it was just manufactured to try and get people to vote for Hillary Clinton.

Q: Who did you find yourself most aligned to in the primaries? Who was your candidate in the primaries?

Geleff: [03:21:50] Ted Cruz. For the main reason, I thought Ted Cruz would follow the Constitution more than any other candidate we had. And I believe he would be a fiscal conservative. Those are two values that I hold dearly when I'm talking politics.

Q: So you believe there's a politician who's a fiscal conservative?

Geleff: [03:22:01] Yes. I do. There's a couple of them. Ted Cruz. My congressman, Justin Amash. I know he's a fiscal conservative and he's a constitutionalist. I support him 100 percent. I've helped with his campaign as far as setting signs up in our county the last two or three elections because I believe in the man.

Q: And can you tell me a little bit about your work? You talked about having—first of all, I know talking politics at work can be a dangerous thing. So my hat's off to you for getting into that pond. But what's the racial makeup at work and do people get along at work? Is everybody sort of just focused on the job? What's the work environment like?

Geleff: [03:22:25] Work environment's pretty good in my opinion. We all try and do the job. It's easier to do the job if you're getting along, can find common ground. The race ratio is probably 70 percent white, 30 percent black. And then you've got, you know, some Hispanics and stuff in there. But I'd say 60 to 70 percent white. And it's easier to work together if you get along than it is if you're arguing. And being a union member, a lot of them down there find it strange that I'm conservative, that I vote Republican, and I'm not worried about letting them know that, I'm not afraid of it. I said they could take me or leave me for what I am.

Q: Are most of the union members Democrats? Have you found most of them are—because I wonder sometimes if there's like, you know people always say “conservative Republican, liberal Democrat.” But sometimes I find that Democrat, Republican, liberal, conservative are not necessarily connected. In that it's not necessarily a perfect lineup of values, I guess.

Geleff: [03:23:02] No, it's not. It's not a perfect lineup but I do know that there are people down there that traditionally will consider themselves Democrats, they cross over the line and they did vote for Trump. And I think it had more to do with economics. They were voting their purse, I think. Yeah. [laughs]

Q: No, I think you're right. Do you think that in your opinion, in Battle Creek, are race relations better now than they were when you were a kid?

Geleff: [03:23:24] I actually may be think they have gotten worse.

Q: And can you put my question into your answer?

Geleff: [03:23:27] OK. Do I think race relations are worse now as opposed to when I was a kid? I think they may be a little worse just because of the environment that we went through in the last eight years of the Obama administration. It seemed like every time you heard something, there was always a racial component to it when there shouldn't have been. I didn't see it the way the media portrayed it or how the administration portrayed it. I don't think it was there. It might have been there sometimes. Not all the time.

Q: Are you one of those Trump voters who originally voted for Barack Obama twelve years ago—nine years ago. As a union member? Or were you already on the conservative side?

Geleff: [03:23:54] I was already on the conservative side. As far as presidential goes, I've only voted for one Democrat in my life and that was 1980, the first year I was able to vote. I voted for Jimmy Carter because I wasn't politically active, I wasn't politically savvy. I voted the way Mommy and Daddy voted. And they were for Jimmy Carter. Eighty-four, I voted for Reagan. I voted Republican ever since because after 1980 I grew in my political beliefs and my political beliefs don't align with the Democratic party at all.

Q: And why do you think that in general the Democratic Party is a party that has many more people of color than the Republican Party? Is it because they've been sold a bill of goods, is it because they offer more to the community? I've been reading all the coverage and reading the data about who's voting for whom. It's clear—especially in the last election, more white people

voted for Trump than voted for Hillary Clinton. And more people of color of all stripes voted for Hillary Clinton than voted for Trump. I guess what I'm confused about is that I understand an ideological split and that you and I might disagree on politics or something. But how does race get embedded in? I don't think being conservative or liberal is a white or a black thing. I think it's just a personal philosophy thing. Why do you think that the two parties are so separated racially?

Geleff: [03:24:44] I believe when you're talking about race and politics, I believe a lot of black people do not know the history of the Republican Party. The Republican Party came into existence because of slavery. And I don't believe they're taught that. I believe they're sold a bill of goods by your Al Sharptons, your Jesse Jacksons that tell them that Democrats got your back. I don't see that. I would like to see more black people learn about the Republican Party and Republican values. And I think that if they did, if they didn't listen to the leaders out there, I think they would change their ways and the way they're voting. I really do believe that.

Q: Do you think your life would have been different if you had been born black?

Geleff: [03:25:15] It's possible it would have been. I probably would have had to bite a little harder for what I've got. But as I said earlier, I believe this is the greatest country in the world and you can be anything you want to be as long as you strive for it.

Q: Because one thing that's interesting when I talk to different white people about being white and this idea that you don't think about your race that much. As a white person you don't have to

think about your race that much. So would you say—I know this may sound like a weird question, but are you attached to your whiteness at all?

Geleff: [03:25:39] I don't know how to answer that. I really don't. Do I put an emphasis on my whiteness? No.

Q: Let's say—and I think I asked Joel this question. You know, when you were leaving I said, "There's two doors here. If you walk through one of those doors there's a 50-50 chance, totally arbitrary, that you would come out the other side black. You walk through this door, you're guaranteed to emerge as you are, as a white man." Would you choose one of the doors, would you just walk through either one? How would you make that—which door would you walk through?"

Geleff: [03:25:58] [laughs] In all honesty, I'd probably walk through the white door. Because that's where all my experience has been. If I mistakenly walked through the black door, I'd probably have to make some adjustments. But as I said before, I would have to apply myself a little bit harder than what I do now. And maybe fight a little bit harder for what I want. But I think I would accomplish my goals in the end.

Q: First of all, is there anything that we didn't talk about that is important for you to say as part of this project?

Geleff: [03:26:22] No, not really. I think maybe we've covered everything—I've covered everything I've wanted to get out there as far as race goes.

Q: And I just have to say I really appreciate you coming in and talking to us openly and honestly. I know it's a weird discussion.

Geleff: [03:26:31] Yes, it is.

Q: It's an uncomfortable discussion to talk about whiteness with other white people. It's just weird and I recognize that. And especially with someone you've never met before. So I really appreciate you coming in. You'll get a transcript of the thing and you can go through and correct it at any point you feel uncomfortable with it. As I said, [unclear] we're trying to understand better how white people think about their race, just as you said, so we can try and create a better paradigm for how the races communicate. I think that we as white people don't really think about it and we're trying to understand it.

Geleff: [03:26:50] Make a better society.

Q: Make a better society. I think that's the other thing I've seen. I've traveled all over the country doing this and it's that I think there's a lot of artificial divisions between—people say, "Oh, you're a conservative, you're different than I am." Or, "I'm a liberal, I'm different from you." And I think most people that I meet have the same goals. They want economic security, they want safety, they want their children to do better than they do and they want good health.

Geleff: Mhm.

Q: And the fact that we might disagree to get there, but we have a lot of shared values that we all have, whatever your political persuasion, race, ethnicity.

Geleff: [03:27:08] Right. And at work, I'll engage people of color, white people. I'll engage them about politics, about where the country's headed. You know, what needs to be corrected. I don't have any problem. I don't let race determine what I talk to you about.

Q: So what we're doing now, we're going to take a few stills. So just—[pause] I would ask you to smile but you seem [laughter] I know this is a really uncomfortable—this is the most uncomfortable part of the whole process. You have to look at me and pretend that you're just—

Geleff: Is that good enough right there?

Q: Yes. It is.

Geleff: OK.

Q: Thank you.

Geleff: All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]