

STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Jeremy Lazarus

INCITE

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jeremy Lazarus conducted by Whitney Dow on January 27th, 2018. 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.

Time: ATC

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Jeremy Lazarus

Location: Richmond, VA

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: January 27th, 2018

Q: [unclear] So, first of all, can you tell me your name, where you're from, and just a little about yourself?

Lazarus: [09:41:56] Jeremy Lazarus. I was born in Portland, Maine. My family moved to Akron, Ohio, in—four years after I was born. My dad was part—the family had a shoe factory up in Maine, and that closed and he needed to look for another job. He was an engineer by trade, or graduation. Anyway, by occupation. And he found a place at Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. It wasn't easy. But anyway, we moved to Akron, Ohio. That's where I grew up. And then, when I was looking for a college, I was trying to get far enough away from home so I didn't have to come home every day or weekend, but close enough that I could get—it was also during the Civil Rights period. I wasn't paying very much attention at the time. So, I didn't want to go to the Deep South, even though it was going to be a lot sunnier than Akron. And if you grow up with ice and snow, you want to get away from it. Virginia had a much more moderate climate. My dad had taken us across the country, and one item that I remembered on one of the trips was the road from Monticello down to Richmond. And I thought, mm, Williamsburg would be nice. So, I chose the college of William and Mary, got early acceptance, and that's where I went.

Q: And can you tell me a little bit about your childhood, what it was like growing up in Akron at the time that you did, the community that you lived in? Was it—how did—your sort of relationship to the other kids growing up, things like that?

Lazarus: [09:43:42] The—actually, we had a pretty robust neighborhood. My parents liked us to be outdoors and not bugging them too much inside. So, we were given a lot of independence. We played a lot at—there was an elementary school just down the street, so virtually every day, we would be out there doing something. A lot of it was playing ball or climbing trees. There were—pretty good relationship with the two or three other boys in the neighborhood. It was, at the time, a largely working-class neighborhood, working to—a little above, but not essentially one of the great neighborhoods of the thing. And mostly, an all-white neighborhood. When that changed, my parents moved us to a different neighborhood where a new school had opened. It was—this was around high school age. We were fifteen. Like I said, it was around—fifteen or so. And that was because black families had moved into the other neighborhood, and all the terrible stories of change were going on at the time.

So, we went—I grew up there. That was a much more prosperous area, not that our house was much different. It was a strain on the family resources. My mother went back to work. She was among the first women in our community to go back and get a degree. I remember she was back going to college in something like '61 or '62. The local paper didn't start writing a big story until '64 or '65 about some woman who was back in—wasn't that amazing and remarkable that women were going back to college. So, she was ahead of her time for middle-class white women. Obviously, black women were working, and so were, probably, if there were Hispanic

women in the area, there would have been few—that had been working all their lives. And I look back at some of the thing I thought and people I'd met. Oh, women were working, but for the most part, middle-class white women felt that they didn't have to work. The husband was going to take care of them, certainly until the '60s.

But in any case, to get more money into the household, she became a teacher, and enjoyed that. It changed the household some. We were not great friends. I was not great friends with anybody in that area. One of the things about the new school was that the kids liked to play the dozens.

That's basically slang for insulting each other, and it was very vicious insulting. I participated for the first half year of my freshman class, and then I realized it was really hurtful. I didn't like it, and I didn't like people who were doing it. So, I resolved not to speak to anybody again at the school. So, pretty much, I was on my own and didn't interact with students. I found the local—there was a Jewish place—we were—grew up Jewish—in the area, and they had programs for youth, and that's pretty much where I spent my outside time doing things. It—and there was an organization for teens, and I was part of that.

[INTERRUPTION]

One of the reasons—excuse me, I'm sorry. One of the reasons that the school problem became more intense is, in my own household, there was a lot of sharp talk about individuals and brothers. And I had become unhappy doing that, as well. So, it just—the whole thing, the whole

process was partly out of the household of how you treat people. But at school, it was—really was vicious. Clothes—insults of—really nasty nature, enough to make people feel very badly about themselves.

Q: What do you mean in your household there was sharp talk? Maybe—can you—

Lazarus: [09:48:21] Well, my older brother, we didn't realize it until much later—has—was a high-functioning autistic person, and it had become a practice to be insulting to him. It was around that time, or a little earlier, that I'd realized that was ridiculous, and I stopped doing it. So, it—I think that influenced what I found at the school, that it was nice to fit in by—with the group that was the in group, but then I realized it was really just a practice I didn't want to participate in.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your move? And you talked about saying that when, you know, black people had started moving in, there was—lots of stories about—I can't remember what you said, the [unclear]

Lazarus: [09:49:11] Well, it was not so much the news stories, but there was obviously information about neighborhood busting. The black community, or at least those who lived closest to us, there was kind of, like, a line that people had not previously crossed. It may have been ten blocks to north or west or east, something like that. When I went to middle school, I was in a school that was somewhat integrated. That is, white neighborhoods and black neighborhoods came to the same school, based on the assignment. The—it wasn't that black

families lived in our neighborhood. It's just that the school was set up so it accepted feeders from elementary schools from different portions of the city. And I can't remember how it worked. If this were Richmond, it would be a bit of Ginter Park and a bit of Battery Park—would have mingled, say, at Ginter Park School. But there, I don't remember what—how the thing worked. I wasn't—really was paying very little attention. In any case, there were black students at the school.

Q: But what was the conversation in the neighborhood that drove your—that you were—

Lazarus: [09:50:36] No, it was my parents.

Q: No, that's what—I'm sorry, what was the conversation?

Lazarus: [09:50:39] Basically, "Oh, a black family has moved in. Neighborhood's busting. It's"—they weren't truly vocal. They weren't much for—we weren't in at a major discussion about it, but it was after the first family moved in, they were looking for another place to live.

Q: And do you remember how that impacted you, how you thought about that? What—do you remember what you thought at the time about this idea that you would be leaving a neighborhood because black people were coming in?

Lazarus: [09:51:13] I'm not sure that I was aware enough, except that I knew that it was a change for that reason, and that it was solely for that reason. But what impact it had, I really

wasn't—to be honest, I'm not sure—I think I had mixed feelings about it, just because I was used to where I was living, and the uprooting—but it was—I assure you, I wasn't thoughtful enough to even thinking—think about it, you know? I read books, and—but it—those weren't the books that—about contemporary stuff. I wasn't reading the newspaper, I wasn't paying attention very much to what was going on. So, the fact that they moved was—I understood why we moved. I was thinking about it. I think I had some discussions with my brother. But it was mixed feelings about why we were doing it and whether it was worthwhile. But, you know, parents were in charge. It wasn't like I was going to lead a revolution.

Q: And do you remember when you first became aware of your own race?

Lazarus: [09:52:23] That's a very good question. I think in middle school, the—getting along with some of the black students—they were more physical than I was. I envied, in many ways, their abilities, let's say, at running or shooting a basketball. I wasn't sure I could compete. There was a point I wanted to play basketball, but I wasn't willing to put in the practice. So, I recognized that some people were going to practice more than I did. The—I had the size, but not the desire, if you will. But it was there, because the competition was keen. And some of the older black students preyed on younger, weaker students, and particularly the white students, for lunch money. They would take stuff. And the bullying was annoying, but there was also classes, the question of which class you're in. And for a while, I sought to be in the mixed class, because I didn't feel like moving on was quite the right thing to do, just because there were black students in the class. The way they worked it was they had some AP [advanced placement] or whatever they called it, and that was mostly for the white kids. And I didn't want to do that. I didn't see

any purpose to it. But the physical competition was something that actually made me move. I played a hand-slapping game with another black student. Nice guy. But he was so much better at it and I was so tired of having my hands slapped by him and losing that I actually left the class for that reason.

But one of the things that wasn't available to any student and that the administrators failed to do was assure—at that point, you're trying to build up confidence in your body, and I've realized that whether—whatever school you're in that the most important thing that the administrators could do is assist the students to become more confident in themselves, which is why I advocate for having karate or jujitsu or some martial arts discipline as the physical education, because students who are weaker or otherwise in a gym class—I always had problems climbing the rope, for example. There were a couple of other activities I wasn't good at, and I really didn't want to put out the effort. You know, the coach—you're there in the middle of the class, hanging on the rope—"climb, climb." You know, you feel embarrassed. But with a martial arts discipline, everybody has an opportunity. And the discipline itself of bowing, of learning the appropriate moves enables you to feel more confident if someone confronts you, that you, as a smaller, weaker person, can handle them. My three grandsons have taken that. At my encouragement, the mother enrolled them there. And they felt more confident in a couple of situations where they faced somebody who was inimical or hostile or attempting to bully them, they felt a bit more confident about addressing the situation.

Q: I wonder, just—sort of wrap up and come back—and how did this—when you, you know—because the original question was when—do you remember when you first—

Lazarus: [09:55:55] That was in—right then.

Q: —became aware? Can you put my question a little bit into your answers, so we know what we're talking about?

Lazarus: It would have been in—

Q: Because my voice isn't ultimately going to be in the—

Lazarus: [09:56:03] No, no, it would have been, seriously, in sixth grade. I think, like most people, we were floating in a neighborhood, a pretty homogenous neighborhood. So, you wouldn't—I never thought about who was—differences. It'd be more physical differences. Did someone have a limp or something like that, not that there were differences in race. I never thought about that until I started at middle school, and there were actually black students there.

Q: And it's interesting, this seems like a—like, all these experiences seem very vivid to you, still—

Lazarus: Right.

Q: —a number—you know, I'm guessing it's been more than a couple of years since middle school. [laughter]

Lazarus: [09:56:52] Fifty years, yes. The—I knew the most critical moment, and I knew what it meant, was when I transferred from the class. And it was after losing that hand-slapping game for the umpteenth time. And it was at that point I knew what I was doing, that I was breaking a—deliberately moving away from a racial integration to homogeneity, and to get away from that. And I understood very much what it was. I was very conscious of what I was doing.

Q: All right, that's really interesting, that that's something that still sticks with you. And what was the—what was—once you moved to the new class, how did you see yourself in relationship to that class and to the class that you had left?

Lazarus: [09:57:45] The class—I was always good in class, so I didn't think really much about the studies. I was just disappointed in myself that I had to do that. And the fact that I had less interaction with the black students, it was—I was disappointed that I was—I felt cowardly, and that was a major issue for me. I mean, the class itself or the information to do—writing or whatever it was in English class, or—all of that was—I mean, I floated through the classes. I was smart enough to be able to take, you know, whatever was thrown at me, or read whatever they required, or do whatever was offered. It was the distinct effort to get away from what I knew was important at the time.

Q: And as you've gone through life since that time, how has that feeling of feeling cowardly in that moment or consciously understanding what you did in that moment, how has that sort of,

like, impacted other events in your life? Or how has—it's—because it's something that you—
so—

Lazarus: [09:58:55] Oh, it's changed. There was—I was in Richmond. I worked as a reporter since around 1971. I've been in different areas. And initially, I was not, I would say, conscious. When I covered an area called the Northern Neck of Virginia, which is a peninsula to the east, here. There's two—basically two peninsulas in Virginia that kind of jut into, I guess, the Potomac. This is the upper part. They call it the Northern Neck. In any case, I was covering the four counties, but one thing that I wasn't conscious of was the black community, really. And I didn't write very much about it. So, it was—kind of, like, unaware that there was this whole thing. I mean, I fished, I went hunting with people, but it was mostly the entire white community. I wasn't even aware of a black community. And there was a black community, and they had a whole bunch of neat stuff going on, but I wasn't aware of it, nor was I paying much attention.

The—and as I came to Richmond—I was transferred back here—yes, basically, you come to think of two communities, if you will, and you get used to people in what you would call menial jobs—they're at the car wash. Clean your car. The—mowing the lawn. Just outside work. Work that you as a college educated guy, me as a college—wouldn't do. Just ordinary work. Retail store clerks, that sort of thing. You get used to that. Well, as it happened—and I wasn't really—I still wasn't very aware. It was around '85, and I got a job—I decided I was going to move. My brother was at the *Daytona Beach News Journal*, and I went down there to work as an editor. And that's when I had the revelation, because surprisingly enough, the same conditions, what I had seen in Richmond, white people were doing those jobs. And the fun part was that the birds

that we think of as nuisances—grackles—not sparrows, but there are a bunch of crows and little birds, they're all black up here. Well, down in Florida, they're white.

And all of a sudden—and I lost my job, and there I was in a house, and I had—we rented to four or five people who were just in the same—rented out—I rented a space, and then subleased it—rooms to the folks so we could all live and pay our rent. And even the garage went to somebody. And in—this was all white families. And the mother couldn't take care of all of her kids, and she farmed half her kids out to a grandmother or sister or something like that. It was precisely what I had seen in Richmond. And so, I had a revelation. It was a—poverty, and it didn't have anything to do with skin color. It had to do with how much money you had. That's when I started getting conscious of the world around me and what had gone on. So, I was fortunate in that. When I came back to Richmond, I had a different perspective. I didn't work there. I worked in other jobs. But then, I went to Washington, and even there I lived in a—basically, a racially mixed but predominantly black portion of the town, because the rooms were cheap there. But it was racially mixed. And then, you get to see different things. I remember vividly in Washington, the *Washington Post* ran this big story about the 5th and P gang, I think, or 5th and R Street gang. It was—terrible place. And I happened to have a job on Capitol Hill as a secretary to—a receptionist or something to a trade association that I had gotten. And I deliberately walked through that neighborhood every single day where they had said—this was a horrible place, violence everywhere. And I kept looking to see where the violence was, and all I saw was clothes hanging on lines. What few people were out and about were doing whatever ordinary people do. And I kept on thinking, excuse me?

The other part was when I learned about the Nation of Islam. And I was at a barbershop. There was a Shabazz Barber Shop. And I went in there and they had *The Call* [*The Final Call*]. And I'm getting the name wrong. But anyway, the Nation's newspaper, there. And in the back—I'd heard terrible things about Mr. Farrakhan. And in the back, they had a listing of jihad. Here's what jihad means. Oh, I—now I got it, we got the radical part. I mean, it was just an ordinary newspaper. And I read, it said, "Take personal responsibility for yourself. Make sure you're clean and healthy. Take care of your family. Go to"—I thought, excuse me? This is what I'm supposed to be afraid of? Are you kidding? So, you know, after that, I was very much a—pretty much a fan of the kinds of things he was doing, not because—because I found his opponents to be less credible after reading that and knowing what he was promoting among his followers, of how best to live their lives, which was as what everybody else wants. Take care of your family, you know, what—be a man, to go get a job. Stay at work, be on time. Well, all the other—the normal nostrums that you teach children about how to navigate the world.

Q: Yes, you talk about this—you talk about being white. What is it that makes you white? What is the—what is it that makes someone white?

Lazarus: [10:05:05] I'm—it's skin color, mostly. There is, you—that's it. I don't—how people treat each other is based on shades, frequently, of color. So, if you're particularly dark, it's harder. And that just is something that has grown up in North America. Now the Canadians and French had a little easier time, and I think it's how we're—our eyes are trained to see. So, I can see color difference, and it does—there is an effect. It's just that I try and do as much as I possibly can to not allow that to distort my view. It is easy, I found, to label—in other words,

“so-and-so did something wrong. Well, that’s a white person, that’s, you know, the individual. So-and-so did something wrong, that’s a black person, so, the whole—you know, they’ve disgraced the whole race, the whole”—you know, you have to—in other words, you’re growing up, and how that—how you obtain this racial gradation that is commonplace is—I don’t know. I mean, it wasn’t like anybody was saying “black people are bad,” or even in the house was talking about it. There were no—I mean, the use of pejorative terms for any group was definitely frowned on, and it wasn’t discussed at synagogue or any other place.

So, how I came to it or absorbed the culture, I assume there’s just this osmosis of this color difference is important. And somehow, I absorbed it. I couldn’t tell you specifically, but I could see that, when I went to middle school, in particular, that there were other students who definitely had different pigment than I did, and that’s pretty much how—that I see it. Now, in terms of how people react, for the most part, the people that I meet tend to react the same way, as long as they’re—even the—even poor people tend to be—I lived at 311 East 19th Street in South Side. That was an area called Blackwell. It’s named for a great educator who became principal of a school, one of the first black principals. But he was James Blackwell, and he was so admired that the area around the school has come to be named for him, and the school still bears his name. What I found, I lived across the street from a family, which would have been regarded as disreputable. The children, you know, the—at twelve and thirteen, they were having babies. Their schooling didn’t work well. They were often partnered outside with some young men who enjoyed pharmaceutical sales that were frowned on. For the most part, they were just fine. The only annoyance I had with them was they tended to litter, and it—that was the only thing I really got frustrated about.

But when they spoke to me, it was, “Mr. Jeremy.” And so, I realized, for the most part, people are fairly—are well behaved and grow up knowing how to deal with the outside world, whatever that is. And if you aren’t going to be annoying to them, it’s unlikely they’re going to be annoying to you. And they weren’t. Nobody bothered me, and I gave people rides when I could. But it was always, unfailingly, “Mr. Jeremy.” They always added the salutation to that, as being older. So, I knew that everybody knew how to behave if they chose to. There was only one bad moment, and that was when they were threatened by a young man who decided to discharge a weapon at them. And fortunately, no one was hurt. But that was the only—there was never any problem in any serious way. There was no threats from them. And I certainly didn’t want to bother them. I stopped thinking that such sales were a threat to my life or that I had to call the police every time somebody was involved in the transaction, as long as they were kind of quiet and weren’t bugging me with violence, I was fine.

Q: And you said you were raised Jewish. Was—were your—was your family very religious, and—

Lazarus: [10:10:00] Modestly. We—now, for the first thirteen, fourteen years, we were very much—I was very much engaged, and so were my brothers, we went to Sunday school. And there was—that was separate, because Sabbath is on Saturday. I was involved in—we went to services routinely on Saturday as part of that. Observed the holidays. It wasn’t—my father went through—I’m not sure how religious he was, but he went through the obligations, and so did my mother, just as we should do it. But it was a—not an Orthodox, but a Conservative family. So,

keeping kosher, for example, we didn't. A number of the things were more obligatory than actually—hey, you light the candles on Saturday, yes, we light the candles on Saturday. But it wasn't like the world came to an end if we didn't. They attempted to maintain the rituals as best they could. So, walking to shul on High Holy Days was always a great thing. Fasting on Yom Kippur, as soon as they could. I always loved the great hymns, and I remember them.

Q: Did you ever face any discrimination for being Jewish growing up?

Lazarus: [10:11:24] I have never known of any personally. My father came through a tougher time, and he had a harder time getting a job after the shoe factory closed. It took him a year or two to find somebody, and part of it, I think, had to do with religion. I'm uncertain, but I think so. It was not—the '70s weren't—I don't think there was any great recession, but as an engineer, I think he felt it was going to be easier than it was to—and Akron was pretty far away from where we were.

Q: Are Jews white?

Lazarus: [10:12:08] For the most part in this country, I think, yes. They come in all shades. It's a religion.

Q: Can you ask my question into your answer so I understand what we're talking about?

Lazarus: [10:12:15] Oh, are Jews white? Jews, for the most part, in this country, those that I've known, are. But they come, like Muslims, in all different shades. So, it would be as—like asking are Muslims all black or brown or—Muslims tend to be from the Middle East, so they would tend to have a darker shade of skin. But then, I'm Norwegian. But they come in all shades. And as Malcolm X noted—I mean, I haven't done what he did, but he went to Mecca and was shocked to see that there were quite a few different kinds of people who were adherents. Judaism is religion, and it's not required to be—but it has tended to be, because it's heavily European.

Q: Well, I mean, I ask that question, because I talk to a lot of Jewish people who feel very, very strongly that they're not white, that they're—because of their—yes, that because of the anti-Semitism they faced, because of the thing that they—that they really—

Lazarus: Oh, okay.

Q: —that they really feel that they're not white, and that's just—you know, I just always ask that. I think it's sort of interesting. I think that a lot of times, you know, the—sort of how your identity is with the intersection of how you perceive yourself and how the world perceives you that you may feel something about yourself, but if you—you know, if I'm looking at you, I'm projecting my own view—

Lazarus: Right.

Q: —on who you are. But I think—

Lazarus: [10:13:45] I would say that, you know, because of the nature of the discrimination, I would—color is not—one can't see—and one reason that the persecution became different was—since the 1920s, and Reform—and the introduction of Reform Judaism, if you're wearing a suit and tie, there's not some kind of—there are a few—people from a certain area, New York, for example, may be—have been a bit more insular, so that the passage of DNA from father to son and mother to child, excuse me, will have some facial characteristics that make people guess someone is Jewish or not Jewish. There may be a European-style nose that is more regular among people than Germans or—if you understand what I mean. But being able to identify somebody in a suit regularly in a synagogue as to—or a woman in a dress and—there's not some specifically—so, I would reject the notion that if you put it on color, that I'm not white, in some ways—silly, unless you're characterizing white as some kind of different group than skin color. In other words, it—more a philosophy or—you'd have to go somewhere else to find that. If you're saying you're discriminated by Christians, sure. But Christians come in all shades, as well.

I mean, I'm not taking away from the challenges people face. But one of the things I have stopped liking about Judaism and the practitioners is the very narrow view. The Irish came here and were treated like—very badly, and they were pretty more obvious, because you could tell by their accent that they were Irish. Now, for Jews, there may have been a New York or a Yiddish New York accent that might have helped identify people, for those who didn't know who they were. But they went through hell, too, and until they got control of the police department and some of the political levers—they understood that. It's just not the same here, and every Jewish

person knows that, that whatever anti-Semitism they face—and they did, certainly in—after college admission, getting into companies, there was a strong period where there were great difficulties. But it wasn't so bad, and there were escape means. For those who are Orthodox and who follow rituals that will separate them, yes, I can say, if you're not cutting your hair and you have dreadlocks coming off the side or your beard is going to be longer than is typical for most males who wear beards, then I would agree. You're different and you're going to face some of the—some people are going to—you're going to have a backlash from people who don't like differences. But for the most part, I would disagree that using the color issue is getting at what they're talking about.

Q: Yes, but I just saw that, like, you know, in the Charlottesville protest, they're marching in there, one of the chants is “Jews will not replace us.”

Lazarus: Right.

Q: And trying to sort of—so, that in the white nationalist movement, Jews aren't considered white. They're considered something other. And, as I said, just—it's an interesting—because people, again, as—it's always a question—it's always a conversation that I have, people who are Jewish, and I—

Lazarus: [10:17:56] They feel differently, I understand.

Q: Yes, and it's—I've been stunned at people who I would never think one way or another—passionately, passionately believe that they're not white. So, let's talk a little bit about now. Do you—

Lazarus: [10:18:17] I just wanted to add something.

Q: Yes.

Lazarus: [10:18:18] The reason why I find it insular is that the cry was “never again.” We have a, surprisingly enough, Virginia Holocaust Museum, right here in Richmond. I do not hear loud cries from those who are remembering the German tragedy in a narrow amount, because there were thirteen million people who got killed, not just six million Jews. The Jews have done a great marketing job of making it seem like only they died. But there were thirteen million. And more importantly, there is no cry when the—in Rwanda, when the Tutsis were getting slaughtered, there was no—the Jewish community was not up in arms. When we had the slaughter of the Rohingya, the first group that leaps to its feet to say where is the U.S. government, this cannot happen, is not the Jewish community. I have found them to be tremendously hypocritical, narrow-minded about who is endangered in this world.

Q: And is that one of the things that's alienated you from your Judaism?

Lazarus: [10:19:31] Much—my brother, though, helped in that way. He's a scholar of—amateur scholar of Christianity, roots of Christianity and Judaism. He's written several books. His

findings are, for example—and it's about the difficulties of proving that Jesus walked the Earth, for example, as well as some of the other early beginnings of how rituals were gained, who wrote what, where the information came from—made it a bit more difficult to pretend that the rituals had as much meaning as the rabbis and temple would like people—absorb. I moved away. But also that, I have been terribly disappointed at the narrowness of the viewpoint of who is endangered.

Q: Do you think of yourself as a Southerner?

Lazarus: [10:20:33] No. The fact that I'm from the North—and this is a—in writing, I write about—I need to know the birthplace of the person—I'm serious. So, you can't just say Richmond, or you're going to—it's got to be did they really get born, are they really a Richmond native? That's really part of this. And I don't know that other Northern newspapers care very much. But down here, that is one thing you pay attention to. So, no, I never could claim Southerner.

Q: So, explain to—talk to me a little about that. When you—can you expound a little bit out on the idea that you have to talk about where someone is from when you're writing a story about them?

Lazarus: [10:21:12] Because that's what Southerners want—that's what people want to know. Where were—where was that person born? Was it really in Richmond or was it in Gastonia, North Carolina, or, you know, where'd they come from? It really shapes people's perceptions

about the roots of the family, which I think are—become important down here. So, the fact they might have been here thirty or forty years or fifty years, it really doesn't matter. They were—I was born in Akron, Ohio. I can never be a Southerner, and that's just the nature of it. And I would be perceived differently if I—people have relationships. They talk about their high school years. Those were their formative years that people remember. There are areas of the city where there were restaurants or popular hangouts that no longer exist, but are in the memory of those who lived here. So, natives have a slightly different perspective on what the city is, how it was formed, and what the importance—are.

Q: What do you account for that, that, like, people—that it's so important that they know place? Because—and how long the family has been there? I mean, you're not—on one side, there's sort of a discussion when I talk to a lot of people about this, they say, “Well, I'm not responsible for the bad behavior of my—of white people in the past, because I wasn't around during slavery or during segregation, so why am I being held accountable for that?” And yet, that same person is saying, “But it's important to know where I—where my—that my family has been in this part of Virginia for X number of generations.” Talk to me a little bit about your—like, why that's so important to people.

Lazarus: [10:23:04] Just sense of place. I think—now that I think of it, I suspect in Vermont and New Hampshire, in Massachusetts, the feelings may lie equally deeply about who is a local person. It may be in the Midwest, where there—where, from the beginning, that was always a place—you could leave the coast and go make your fortune there. I know people grow up there and are natives, but it—because it's—there was a bit more fluidity, and it may be true of the

West Coast. But in the South, it was—your sense of place, of who is around you, the sense of family. I just think down here that that is crucial. Who are your cousins and nephews, and how they fit into the larger pattern? People pay a great attention to that, more than they did, as I recall, up in Ohio. People knew that they had cousins and stuff. But the fact that they lived there or didn't, there was a more fluid—the notion of moving, of going to a different place to start over, I think there's less of it in the South. There's a—perhaps it's the loss of the Civil War still echoing, but people like to be rooted and say, "I'm from here, and I've grown up here." And I think it's that sense of place, and it's very present. Much more present here, I would say.

Q: And how does that intersect with the debates about the monuments, how to think about the Civil War? You know, we're staying over on Monument Avenue and, you know, across from the [Stonewall] Jackson monument. And, like, how does that interface with the changing perspective on the narrative of the South, and—I'm not asking a very, like, clear question, but I think you know what I'm getting at.

Lazarus: [10:25:10] Part of it is of those monuments, when they went up. And when you read about the large crowds, particularly for [Robert E.] Lee and Jackson, just huge numbers of people who gathered and participated in the event. It was a—and I think today the debate is more about—people would like to believe this city and others don't change. I don't know about other communities as much, but there's only a portion of this city that hasn't changed, and it didn't change because no one made the investment to change it. When you look along Broad Street, between—well, actually now between somewhere around 4th or 5th, heading west, a good portion of the buildings remain because nobody—because there was no money to invest in the

community. So, everyone is happy that, “oh, those building—wow, 60 years, wow, who would have thought? Pepsi was there.” Nobody really cared that they stayed or understood why they stayed. The Depression was really tough on this community because it was the second huge decay of the community. The Civil War, there were—the area was broke. It was only the fact that a group of people had a majority and could keep the old bonds and pay them off, so that everything new suffered—was one thing.

But we had, in the '80s and through early 1920s, before the second Great Depression, a lot of new buildings. A lot of those buildings that are built that everyone thinks are—been there forever were actually the product of prosperity from the '80s to the '20s. In terms of these statues, they are a continued emphasis of—for a group of people to say we're still in charge. That's the only way that I can look at them. There's nothing about these symbols that's just—they took over around 1881. The Democrats got back in charge after the war. They had the—there was—they named it weirdly, Farmville—Danville? The Danville Massacre. There was one person who got killed, and there was a small uproar, but the *Times Dispatch* ran it across—the *Times*, I guess, or the *Dispatch*. This was the Danville Massacre, really. And that just came before the election, and they threw the readjusters out, General [William] Mahone. And the whole issue was whether we pay off old bonds or pay a fraction of those bonds, which was key to the development.

I'm sorry, I'm not getting off. But that, from 1881 until about 18—until the 1970s, the Democrats were in charge of the state. I mean, basically, the—Byrd [phonetic] had his group of people when he figured out intelligently how to do it. But that's the people in charge. If you were part of the group that's kind of in charge, whether or not you got to vote or not, you want—you

like that feeling. And the notion of change is tough. If you're seeing a whole group—I mean, Richmond has suffered through that. It's been a difficult adjustment. In '77, when the first black mayor took over, you know, and the majority black council, literally the business community was worried, number of people moved out. There's a real feeling that the city's going to hell, in a handbasket. There wasn't—there were only a few people who reached out a hand. And I have to admit the president of [unclear]. The statue debate has more to do about that: who is in charge? Who is in control? Because the number of people who are engaged in Confederate support is small. Even up in Charlottesville, when you look at the number of people, the so-called—this was the biggest gathering—what were there, a thousand people from across the country who came to say alt-right or whatever it was they were saying, and protect the white race? There weren't very many people. And, of the protestors, you were talking about two thousand.

Now, I recognize Charlottesville's a relatively small place, but you're not talking about twenty thousand people pouring out or a hundred thousand. You're talking about a small group. Even here in Richmond, there was, like—when the group gathered at the statues, and we spent a half million dollars organizing, there was ten—they couldn't even generate fifty people. And the counter-protestors, the activists. I don't think there were two hundred fifty or three hundred. Yes, they outnumbered them, but it wasn't like a hundred thousand people rushed down to the—you know, or fifty thousand. It was small. It was minor league groups. So, a very small group of people are driving this. Most people think about those statues, though, as, in some ways, their version of how Richmond will continue as it has. The major politicians of this town have contributed to that. Initially, when you look at Maggie Walker and where she is placed, that tells you a great deal about this city, its image, and what it likes. Now, if you wish to have a new

image of the town, you would place her at the main intersection, Belvedere and Broad, because that's where the most cars come through, and you would have her as a centerpiece, as big as—at least on a pedestal as big as Robert E. Lee so she would stand out. Because what does she stand for? Achievement, striving for all people. The—sure, she was the first black woman to found a bank and start a—but that's not—if we just look back at that, that's silly. She is not only female, but she is saying you can achieve, we can do it. If we all work together, it's—this is where Richmond can be.

Even today, the statute of Robert E. Lee is most photographed and used as a centerpiece for Richmond because it is the largest statue in town. It is easy to photograph. As you're driving along Monument, boom! There it is, big. Now, it doesn't mean everybody goes along Monument to see it. Nobody cares, you know? Most people don't care. But if you're going to put an icon up of this town, you would put Robert E. Lee up because it's a big statue and it makes it easy to see, and it seems like it's a dominant feature of the town. They did not do that for Maggie Walker, and they have not done that for any of the statues about freedom or justice and equality. On the Capitol Square, you have a statue of Barbara Johns and others who were engaged in school integration. Great idea. But then, you realize they have hidden it away. It is behind a fence, away. It is not stuck in the middle of the intersection, right out front, big time, in the front of the place so everybody sees it every day as they pass, that we—this is our new symbol.

That is what Robert E. Lee and the other statues now stand for for people who are opposed to moving them, that they're still in charge. That the changes, the diversity, the whole bit has not infected this community. Yes, they're historic, they've been up—but that's what it means to

people, for the most part. They're there. They don't care that those people were traitors. They do not care that they fought to dismember the United States for whatever reason. "We're defending Virginia," he said. Blah-blah. They don't care that it has to do about slavery, and they don't care that it offends a group of people who've had political control and, notice, in this particular city, have not sought to use that political control to change very much. Business, yes. I mean, they've been engaged in trying to boost business. But in terms of statues and symbols and changing names on school, hey, that was real difficult. It was Tim Kaine, a white politician, who proposed changing the name of two bridges in town that had been named for Confederates to honor someone like Samuel Tucker, civil rights attorney. And the gentleman who sued the city over its annexation, which brought in a new flood of forty thousand people back in the 1970s, three cases up to the Supreme Court before it got settled. And it's why we have a ward system here, because the Supreme Court ruled that the annexation was illegal unless you—because it affected voting rights.

Anyway, so you're getting back to the thing about the Monument Avenue statues, it is an attempt to maintain control. The city has changed. Lots of buildings have been torn down. Most of the buildings that survived did so because one woman stood up and said, "Hey, we got historic buildings! What are you tearing them down for in downtown? We ought to preserve this stuff." And then, the congress passed a tax credit law. "Hey, you get money if you—you know, you can reduce your tax bill if you invest in a fifty—in a building fifty years or older, so"—and since the 1930s, literally, investment stalled along Broad Street, the older section of Broad Street—Hall Street. So, those buildings remain because nobody wanted to do anything with them for the most part and they'll stay what they were. Don't—do the maintenance. That's why lot of the

commercial strip. Willow Lawn is a reaction to a pretty old downtown where there hasn't been much, you know, investment in retail. You've got to go out to the greenspace to get new retail, so people will think it's nice, you know? Anyway, yes, it's an attempt to maintain or hold on to what you had in some psychic—psychological way.

Q: Where are we on time?

F: We're about fifty-five minutes in. It's 10:30.

Q: Okay.

Lazarus: I apologize, I—

Q: No, no, no, this is—this—you're a great storyteller, so this is really, really—I can tell you're a journalist, because you're a good storyteller, and you've spent a lot of time telling stories over the years, I'm guessing, so—and finding characters and stuff like that. So, that's great. I want to go—like, I want to circle back—and also, you're one of the few people we've talked to down here who has—who articulates really directly how they feel about the monuments in a very clear way, because people are so nervous about talking about them.

Lazarus: That's just—

Q: Yes.

Lazarus: [10:36:44] Hey, look, they're stone. They're—they were carved well. They're, you know, they're very handsome. [laughs] The street would—no one—ten years from now, children would never remember they were there if, you know—it's like the name of our—it used to be the Mosque. There was—the city bought an actual mosque development from Masons in the—1932 or so that had gone broke building it, and basically Depression was there and they couldn't afford it, so they had to get rid of it, 1940. It stayed vacant. It was called the Mosque forever. Now it's called the Altria Landmark Theater. The number of people who remember it was the Mosque is de minimis, or it certainly is going down. Things change. I think everybody recognizes that, and as new generations come, they wouldn't notice the difference. I'm just saying the protests are pretty small in terms of involving people. Most of the people who have expressed an opinion have done so through polls. "You think the monument should stay or"—they haven't gone down to wave signs or do anything. Would there be disappointment? Maybe, across the area.

Would people really move on this? This is a far less political town than people think. The number of engaged people in serious politics, in—even the mayor, just their—if you were here and you saw how little—members of city council are part of the city. The number of times they comment on something, by themselves, with a press release saying, "I stand for this," is about once a year, maybe. You have to call them to get their opinion. Well, that—you know, if you're thinking of New York, it's a far more yeasty place when it comes to politics. Now, it's not that eight million people are involved. Or Baltimore, or—it's not that eight million people—but certainly, you're going to get some thousands of people. Here, the number of people who will

speaking to city counselor—four or five. Maybe you have a dozen regulars. I don't think it's that many. I think it's more like five or six. The number of people who are featured on TV as opposing something, the housing authority's proposing something—there's, like, two. So, it's not like there's this huge upswelling of people. We're a business town. As long as people work, go there, they'll pound their fist at home or something. But, no, the waves of people—even our—in 1968, there was—it subsided very quickly. This was not burn down the city place. It was not Washington, D.C. where they—where the riot over King—no. People occupied some buildings, I mean, it was very tiny, and it has been that way.

Q: I'd like to come back, because we're sort of wrapping up—

Lazarus: I'm sorry, I apologize, go ahead.

Q: No, no, but I just want to come back to a couple of things, the more personal things. Are you happy you're white?

Lazarus: [10:40:06] You know, I've thought about it. I married an African American, and part of the reason was I was working at a newspaper owned by an African American. So, I've done some things consciously to participate in the kind of—and then adopted a number of the positions since coming here. That is, I really courted a black woman because I was part of a newspaper—I went to physicians—I wanted to be part of that, and felt it was not just a duty. So, am I happy I'm white? Yes, I have to come down to that. I feel I navigate the world more easily with lighter skin. My wife thinks so, too. Not in every instance, but I will do things that I'm not

sure every black person is comfortable with. We've had trouble getting payments from the city—I'm with a non-profit. We run an adult high school, which gives people a second chance to get a diploma. And there have been times when it's difficult to pay. I feel very comfortable writing a harsh letter to the director of finance.

Now, part of it is I'm a reporter. But part of it is, yes, I feel color does give me some privilege that I might not feel—now, would I be an outspoken loudmouth if I were—I might be. But I notice that the—that among people who are feeling badly, it is tough for them to feel as confident. And we had a heating problem in Creighton Court, where people lost heat. Now, a few people called TV stations. They had one or two stories, "This person hasn't had heat"—but it was not every family calling. There was no comfort level among those folks in marching down to the RH office and saying, "What the hell are you doing to my family? I demand heat!" Calling the city government to say, "Inspector, get out here! We don't have heat!" None of that. Do I feel more confident about that? Yes. Do I feel my checks will be accepted better? I have to say yes.

Q: And you said you're married to a black woman. Are your grandchildren black?

Lazarus: [10:42:37] We—yes, but that's because we were older when we married, but even—I've been married twice. One was to a woman who was—emigrated from Trinidad, and this is American—I have not had children with anyone. So, yes, the—her daughters have children. And so, they're—it's mostly an African American family. But there's—quite clear that in the past, in their distant heritage, however color is made on skin, that they're not still purely African.

Q: You know, we started this conversation talking about your youth. I said I want to come back. And in the context of this conversation, is—are there—is there anything you regret, about how you lived your life and sort of the arc to it?

Lazarus: [10:43:41] As much as I would like to complain, no. I mean, there are a few quibbles about things I wish I had done differently. The one thing that I wish I had done differently, the one great regret was, as a youth, paying attention more to the world around me. I walked through history, and I was totally unaware it was happening, from the Voting Rights Act to the Civil Rights Act to the great speeches, the March on Washington. The first time I was kind of aware was in college, when Vietnam was going on, and a friend of mine was trying to make sure I was paying attention. And we had a protest around '71, in which people laid down. And I was not clear why people were being there. But I wasn't thinking about the draft. I mean, I really was totally—so, if I had one regret, it is that I walked through great swathes of history and now have to read [laughs] about it rather than having fully experienced it at the time.

Q: Well, don't you think you're also walking through history now?

Lazarus: [10:44:54] Yes, but I'm a bit more conscious of it. But it is—it's hard to see the larger story as we're doing it, in looking back. But I'm a bit more—much more aware of where I am and what the impacts are. But seeing the larger picture is tough. It's hard to tell what Trump means at the moment to the larger picture, or how it affects whether this is a blip, or it affects the whole presidency and the nature of our country. Does it all change again when—if Democrats win a majority? It's just—it's too—some of this is too soon to understand. But the period of

1960 to 1975 in particular, but maybe '55, certainly—but I would say '60, '61, when the Freedom Riders were going is a major break in how the country is organized, who gets what where, in the sense that a group of people who had been totally ignored—there's a second—a third American Revolution. I guess the second is the Civil War—but a third American Revolution that changes the nature of how people are supposed to treat each other. How far that's gone is the question mark that you're exploring, as a matter of fact. But it certainly was a dramatic and abrupt shift in a relationship between the government and citizens, and I think between a great many citizens as they were. Not so much social, but in how people get along with each other, who gets hired.

I remember someone working for Cornell in HR, and she was telling me that, you know, they basically had to mark down what they did, who they offered—there were people who could actually step in and say, “You're not doing a good job if you offer a job to somebody and you take it back because you don't want to hire them, you know, you can be liable for stuff.” But it was also keeping track of who got hired, who got interviewed, so that you could explain to a potential investigator down the road that you weren't being unfair. And that, you know, that's a whole new dynamic for companies. It's not just I get to pick whoever I want. I may have to show that I was doing it somewhat fairly.

Q: You know, I'm—it's a little bit frustrating, because I'm—I could talk—you sound like you had a really interesting life, and I could talk to you much, much longer. I just—like one or two other questions, because one of the things we're trying to understand is this—trying to understand how white identity is created. And I talk to a lot of different people, talk to so many

different people, and I'm trying to figure out, like, what is sort of, like, the difference or what creates—what do you think it is about your experience in life that allowed you—like, for someone who married—who comes from a conservative, you know, relatively conservative background, you choose to marry two women of color, you choose to do this different work, you choose—what is it in your life that you think—and maybe it's just the great awakening that you talked about when you went to Florida. Is that sort of—was it just being in a moment that allowed you to see the world differently? Or do you feel like it was something—

Lazarus: [10:48:34] Yes.

Q: —that was always there?

Lazarus: [10:48:36] No, I was in, I guess, a fluid mental state, but I certainly was less certain of the path forward. I had done a renovation of a home in Oregon Hill, which was a white, working class area. It's called Oregon Hill because, at the time it was developed it was so far from the center of town, they—it was like being in Oregon. That's what they claimed, but—and I didn't do well on it. There were just things that hadn't gone pretty—outside of work that were not going successfully, and work was kind of flat. So, I mean, going to Florida, seeing the change. And literally, right in front of my eyes, there was the—learning that I was wrong about what I saw—that is the fixed notions I had about people in Richmond, because you see the fixed relationship of how people are in that community, and you think that that's normal. And then, you go to someplace where it's turned upside down, like through the looking glass. Yes, it changed my opinion.

So, when I had—in Washington, when I had an opportunity to work for a newspaper that was black-owned, I didn't find that difficult. I realized it was kind of like line crossing. There were still lines, and I also—in New York, I had an opportunity to see a play, I think, by Israel Horowitz called *Lines* [*Line*] in which he discusses, through that play, the fact that we are—kind of constrain ourselves in lines, and that it is good to walk across lines into kind of seeing the world a little differently, from a different perspective. I found that very stimulating. Another book that was helpful to me was James Michener's *Iberia*. I don't know if you read it. It's one of the great travel books of all time. But he describes, I think, the thirteen sections of Spain that he visited, and the different places. And you see here some of the attitudes that he described in the late 1940s in Spain as coming here. For example, have you ever seen anybody stop in the middle of the street, open the door, and go do something and leave their car there? That's "Viva yo," "Hurray for me." That was typical in Spain. The notion of punctilious honor, where you would have to kill somebody who you felt insulted you. Well, guess what? We see that all the time here. Why Spanish attitudes invade other things, I don't know. But those were some of the thought influences that I've had in allowing me to look at the world a little differently, or go to some place that was a little different. And it was that—seriously, that Florida revelation that things I had thought were certain were false, and that there were other reasons for them that were not being correctly attributed.

Q: Is there anything that we didn't talk about in this that you think is important to say about—

Lazarus: [10:52:05] You asked a question: What makes for whiteness? I think it's just the feeling of normality. That is, we grow up thinking the world is a certain way. There are huge storms where we learn differently. I'm talking about the Great Recession, for example. People who thought they were going to keep their house or their job, all of a sudden found great upheaval. So, how you fix it and whether there—whether you're prepared for that kind of huge sea change in your life, I'm not sure anyone is. But for the most part, we have a certainty or we gather a certainty about how the world works, how you walk through, what is normal. And so, difference—I think we take difference as being not normal. And one difference would be skin color. So, no matter whether somebody is successful and you know they're successful, and they move into your neighborhood and you feel great about it, they're successful—we had a doctor who moved into Windsor Farm, a guy named Frank [Royal?] [phonetic]. Been very successful in his medical practice. But I'm not sure that people in Windsor Farm saw him as part of the norm. Now, maybe after five or ten years, as people got comfortable, he was part of the norm. But entering and allowing that—I don't know, the raisin to the cookie, or—just adding that difference, that new ingredient to something, I think a lot of people have trouble with that. And so, the norm—if you see most people being a certain way—and I think in the black community, people see things in a certain way because they, too, are surrounded by a lot of homogeneity. You have to be willing to cross lines, and I think a lot of people find that difficult. They would prefer the norm as we see it. And the norm as we see it in this country in general is going to have a lighter shade of color.

Q: What we're going to do now is just take some stills of you.

Lazarus: Okay.

Q: So, it's just—you just look at the camera and just relax your face, and—[pause) and now you can smile. [laughter) That's the hardest thing to—[pause]And now just totally relax your face. Thank you. Oh, you're wired.

F: Wait one second, yes.

Lazarus: Oh, sorry—

[END OF INTERVIEW]