

How White Privilege is Prevalent in the Twentieth Century: Prejudice Involved in the Case of
Bruce Tucker

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White privilege is a systemic process of society, usually in Western cultures, that provides social, political, and economical advantages to those racially-identified as white. It is important to note that white privilege does not mean white people do not struggle, but instead that it gives certain advantages not accessible to persons of color (Collins 39). White privilege has been enacted to provide white people with power over a society that systematically neglects, handicaps, and negatively profiles racially-identified persons of color. Today, white privilege is shown through innately-positive relationships with authority, being safe from prejudice relating to race, having greater representation, and more (McIntosh 73). In the twentieth century, white privilege sky-rocketed through the concept of the melting pot, which led to those ruled by the government as white, having more advantages in America than persons of color. A salient example of white privilege in the twentieth century was the first heart transplant done by the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) hospital. Bruce Tucker, a black man, was racially-profiled as a “charity patient.” This identification resulted in MCV’s surgeons unethically stealing Tucker’s organs, while he was legally still alive, for the first heart transplant to take place. But the racial prejudice didn’t stop after Bruce Tucker’s death. White privilege changed the outcome of the lawsuit in Bruce Tucker’s name because of the favoritism shown to the white defendants over the black prosecution.

White privilege has been a prevalent part of America’s structure since the country’s creation, stemming from European colonization. Back then, white privilege was caused by

separating people into different races, to make it acceptable to violate natives and enslave those descended from Africa. White people had deemed themselves the superior race to justify their cruelty, creating a racially hierarchical society that still runs today. Modern racism has led many to believe discrimination and white privilege are concepts of the past, even though they can be seen everywhere in America. White privilege is a more gray concept rather than black or white. A racially-identified white person can condemn racial injustice, but still, reap its benefits (Collins 39).

At the start of the twentieth century, millions of immigrants came from all over the world in search of freedom and more opportunities for their families. With this influx of new arrivals from different countries, a question was raised: how would these immigrants fit into the hierarchy of America? In the video series *Race: The Power of Illusion*, Episode Three - "The House We Live In," it is noted that "immigrants often (would) work the hardest, poorest paying, and most dangerous jobs; along with the so-called inferior races already (there)" ("Race" episode three). Immigrants of all races, Native Americans, and African Americans were all at the bottom of the chain, living in worse conditions than their white American counterparts. This new wave of different groups entering the U.S. resulted in the growth of racial theory, which is that people belonged to different subsets of groups, and the white races claimed the higher order. White privilege was extensive in the early twentieth century. Many white Americans held the belief that minorities deserved these poor living conditions because they were "consequences of their innate, racial character" ("Race" episode three). White Americans were systematically oppressing other races to gain overall power, but "power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is, in fact, permission to escape or dominate" (McIntosh 77). One way this is shown is through the industrial complex. This complex created slums - overcrowded and unsafe

urban areas that were mostly occupied by minorities. Persons of color were forced to live in these dangerous areas just because of their ethnic background. Horrible housing and working conditions weren't the only danger of being a minority, many also feared for their bodily safety. For persons of color, lynching was a real fear because from "1890 through 1920, 2,500 African Americans were lynched in the south" ("Race" episode three). To be white meant to not live in a constant state of fear. It meant more safety, security, and privileges than racial minorities.

Because of the rights that came along with the label, many immigrants wanted to be racially profiled as white. In the 1910s, the term the melting pot was introduced and used to describe the transformation of lighter-skinned European immigrants into white Americans. The phrase came from Israel Zangwill, who said "God will melt down the races of Europe into a single, pure essence" ("Race" episode three). The melting pot only referred to the assimilation of European immigrants, it did not include persons of color. Whiteness was the key component in becoming a citizen since in 1790 an act was passed that only allowed white immigrants to become naturalized citizens ("Race" episode three.) Immigrants of all origins would go to court in hopes of being legalized as white because of the benefits that went along with the label. In the twentieth century, being a white citizen meant the privileges of having more representation in congress, better-paying jobs, clear access to vote, safety from bodily harm and prejudice based on race, being placed on juries, and more. These were all rights denied to anyone considered a person of color.

Even during the Civil Rights Movement, when people of color were starting to gain rights they were denied for so long, there was still a clear system of oppression in place (Jones 141). On May 24th, 1968 at 6:00 p.m., an unconscious black man entered the MCV hospital by ambulance (Jones 141). He was admitted for a large contusion on the back of his head caused by

a fall while drinking but left the hospital dead and without his heart and kidneys. His name was Bruce Tucker and *The Organ Thieves*, a book written by Chip Jones, follows his treatment in the MCV hospital; along with the events leading up to his admission and the lawsuit, in his name, that followed after. Bruce Tucker was in dire condition at his arrival at the MCV hospital; the neurosurgeons “determined that the blow to the back of Tucker’s head had caused his brain to shift five millimeters,” which left him with an inability to breathe properly (Jones 142).

Soon after Tucker’s arrival word spread around the hospital and surgeons found out about Tucker’s bad health, but the surgeons weren’t wishing for Tucker to improve, but instead looked to make use of his healthy organs (Jones 142). At this time, several successful heart transplants had occurred around the world, and the surgeons, Dave Hume and Dick Lower were hoping to achieve the next. The idea that Bruce Tucker was near death, but was the owner of a healthy heart, excited the surgeons. Hume and Lower weren’t concerned with the hospital treating Tucker, but instead with using him as a ploy to further medical advancement and secure fame. Bruce Tucker was unfairly predisposed as a “charity patient” because of the alcohol on his breath and the fact that he was black. The hospital didn’t expect someone like him to pay his bills (Jones 143). But this was all purely based on prejudice. MCV did not know Bruce Tucker’s financial standing or his character. The hospital made these false claims based on racial stereotypes. Giving the black patient the benefit of the doubt didn’t serve the surgeon’s best interest. The racial profiling of Bruce Tucker as a “charity patient” made him more eligible, in MCV’s eyes, to be an organ donor. Since the hospital did not think he would pay, they made a profit off of Bruce Tucker another way; harvesting his heart, without any consent, and giving it to a white patient who would pay. Had Bruce Tucker been white, he would not have been racially

stereotyped as unable to pay his bills, and he certainly would not have had his heart removed from his body, non-consensually, within the first 24 hours of his hospital visit.

The main point used to argue that white privilege was not a part of the mistreatment of Bruce Tucker at MCV was that Louis Russell, another black man, became a heart recipient at that same hospital. So it's questioned if Bruce Tucker was a victim of racial discrimination at MCV, how come another black man was treated extremely well at the same hospital? An important fact is that Louis Russell became a heart recipient *after* Bruce Tucker was a nonconsensual organ donor. The MCV hospital wanted to "right their wrongs" with Tucker's treatment and used Russell to do so. Louis Russell was an educated, family man who was charismatic in the public's eyes. He was considered, in my classmate Luce's words, a "model minority." So, the hospital made his operation and recovery extremely public. Louis Russell was constantly interviewed for newspapers, giving his high regards to the hospital staff and surgeons. But the excellent treatment of Louis Russell should not diverge people away from remembering the racial discrimination that Bruce Tucker faced at the same hospital. The correct treatment of one person does not erase the mistreatment of another.

After William Tucker found out about the mistreatment of Bruce Tucker, his brother, at the MCV hospital, he filed a lawsuit in hopes justice would be served. A large part of the trial was whether Bruce Tucker had been legally dead before the transplant. Douglas Wilder, the prosecution's attorney, argued that Abdullah Fatteh, the doctor who ordered the pulling of the plug, was the cause of Bruce Tucker's death (Jones 235). Fatteh had made the call too soon, and without consent, to take Tucker off life support. The defendant's rebutted this by saying Tucker had experienced brain death, that there was "total cessation of function of the central nervous system or brain" (Jones 275). Wilder was following the lawful definition, while Jack Russell of

the defense wanted to introduce a new nonlegal definition of what death was. Judge Compton stated that the court was meant to follow the law and that "this court adopts the legal concept of death and rejects the invitation offered by the defendants to employ a medical concept of neurological death in establishing a rule of law" (Jones 278). Judge Compton had accepted the lawful definition of death to be used in this case and the trial seemed to be moving in favor of the prosecutors. It seemed obvious that the prosecution would win this case, but this all changed on the last day of court.

Tension was high throughout this trial. If the jury ruled in favor of the prosecution, it meant Abdullah Fetteh would be held liable for the murder of Bruce Tucker. On the last day of court, Judge Compton made this realization and changed the outcome of the trial. He took back his initial agreement with the prosecution's definition of death and told the jury to consider the defendant's idea of brain death (Jones 286). Judge Compton changed his mind about the importance of legality when he saw that the team of white defendants was going to face the repercussions of their unethical behavior. Douglas Wilder's team had the stronger legal and ethical argument, but this did not matter in the end. Judge Compton favored the safety of the white defendant's reputation and livelihood over the black prosecution's deserved justice. The court should've followed the legal definition of death because that is the point of the trial, to determine what is legal and what is not. Brain death wasn't a legal concept at the time but still accepted by the judge in the end. The legal system had once again failed racial minorities because the jury voted in favor of the defendants due to white privilege.

Bruce Tucker never got, and will never get, justice for his mistreatment at the MCV hospital, but *the Organ Thieves* does a thorough and detailed job telling his experience. Hopefully, more and more people will read it and learn from it. Even though this essay speaks

mainly on the twentieth century, white privilege is still a current problem in America, and it won't disappear by ignoring its existence; instead, it should be more widely discussed. The first part of solving a problem is acknowledging there's a problem in the first place. Only then can we eradicate the system that favors racially-identified white people over persons of color.

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