

Deeper Sickness

Speaking of Race

Jim: Hi. I'm Jim.

Jo: I'm Jo.

Jim: And this is speaking of race.

Jo: It is.

Jim: And today we have a very special guest.

Jo: Indeed. It's none other than our own Erik Peterson.

Erik: Hi., thank you for having me on your podcast.

Jim: Yaaaay!

Erik: Thank you for having me on your podcast.

Jo: So Erik is here today to talk to us about his new book with Margaret Peacock called A Deeper Sickness. Subtitle. Journal of America in the Pandemic Year. It came out just a couple of weeks ago, 2022.

Erik: Available at fine bookstores near you.

Jo: With Beacon Press. And it is it's kind of a popular book, right? It is in like Barnes and Noble. It's all over the place.

Erik: I guess so.

Jo: Erik is feeling self-conscious about doing a thing that is an accomplishment.

Erik: It is a trade book.

Jo: Yes. Which is a fancy way of saying...

Erik: Not an academic about a book.

Jo: That doesn't cost hundreds of dollars and sell ten copies.

Erik: That is true. It does not cost hundreds of dollars.

Jo: And it will sell more than ten copies.

Jim: Way more.

Erik: And there's an audio book.

Jim: And a website and all kinds of extra resources that come with it.

Erik: It does. It comes with fancy websites.

Jo: We'll get into that. So we want to talk about this book, not just because we're biased. And Erik is admittedly usually one of our co-hosts, but also because it's got a lot to do with race. So that's what we're going to do today, right, Jim?

Jim: Absolutely.

Erik: I'm terrified.

Jo: Poor Erik. How the tables have turned.

Erik: How the tables have turned.

Jo: Okay. So so the book is written in sort of journal style.

Erik: No, it is a journal.

Jo: In journal style. And for those who have not yet read it, can you tell us a little bit more about it? So I feel like in the preface you both do a really good job of kind of articulating what motivated you to write it, how you went about doing it. But tell our listeners, how did you do it and why.

Erik: The project originated by accident, as some projects do. I teach a class on the history of epidemics. It's a history of medicine class, but I use epidemics as the the sort of lens by which we try to examine the history of medicine. And in 2019, when I knew that I would be teaching again in 2020, I was like, well, I need to update the syllabus. And what is an illness or an epidemic that I don't have on the current syllabus that I should think about? Oh, SARS as in SARS 2002, 2003. I didn't have anything in the syllabus about it. So I thought, you know, this is a great example of how we handle contemporary pandemics since it does come from China to Canada. And I didn't say anything about it, so I thought that's what I have to revise in the syllabus. And then January 2020 happens and there's all this news about, hey, there's this new pneumonia in China. And so the South China Morning Post started having these stories about this pneumonia and saying that it really seems a lot like SARS from back in 2002, 2003. So I got really excited and I downloaded that article thinking, ha ha, maybe this is an example of a modern day plague, sort of. And maybe we can find out how does a super modern society like China deal with this in 2020? And then in class we could analyze how that was versus older pandemics or whatever.

Jo: Little did you know.

Erik: Right? As I started to download stuff off the Internet and had access to Weibo, which is the sort of social media inside China. And then you can just put it into Google Translate. I don't actually read Chinese. You could see that people were really freaked out. People were saying, this feels a lot like SARS 20 years ago.

Jo: Yeah.

Erik: Then there was the Diamond Princess, the boat that was cordoned off the coast of Japan, and then it came to Italy and Iran, not based on the same weekend. And all these videos are coming on social media that were really terrifying. And then, of course, finally it hits Europe and then the United States. And unbeknownst to me, Margaret was doing the same thing. She had started a little bit later. But what she was really interested in was how the American government, especially Trump, was minimizing and minimizing and minimizing at the same time that medical officials in the United States were trying to walk this funny line between affirming what Trump said, but also trying to warn people that in fact, this is coming and it's going to be bad.

Jo: Okay, so it began with a class, but I feel like there were other things that motivated you towards doing this. Is that true?

Erik: Not at first. I mean, at first it was really supposed to be a story about an epidemic. But then very quickly and we talked about this on this podcast, by April 10th, the first data came out about the essentially the racial lines were being re-entrenched by the way, that the disease sort of worked worse in certain communities than it did in other communities. And as we talked about on our podcast, those were the traditional lines of race and class. Yeah. And it didn't seem like the US government was doing all that much to address that kind of stuff. So the book very quickly took this angle of why is it that America has problems in this kind of a way? Why is it that we don't address injustices that happen around medicine, even if we're equipped to? I mean, one of the galling moments was early on, might have been in February of 2020, before the virus really showed up in large numbers in the United States, people were saying, well, the United States is the most epidemic prepared country in the world. And yet it really, really clearly wasn't, at least if you weren't white.

Jim: And wealthy.

Erik: And wealthy. Right. Yeah. So that that's the direction that the book started to take pretty early on, honestly.

Jo: Mm hmm. Yeah. I like how in the book you take on this journalistic, almost like verbal tic about how pandemics are great equalizers, which, of course, the data weren't bearing out. And you do a really good job of showing that. In fact, they're not great equalizers, they're great magnifiers of inequality. Really? Especially racial.

Erik: Yeah, and every journalist early on kept saying this the pandemic is an equalizer. Well, you know, it's going to equalize things. You know, it doesn't distinguish between a king and a subject or whatever. But clearly that's false and it's always been false. But yeah, I think that is we did try to capture that early on. How often that was said in the early days when it was very clear that that was completely false.

Jim: And that emphasizing the lines of inequality there as part of the deeper sickness that you guys pulled together.

Erik: Yeah, exactly. That's right. And I should say more about that. But you just said a good. Yeah, that's right, Jim. Yeah, it is. It's true that all along we saw that there wasn't just one pandemic. I mean, yes,

there was coronavirus. And that was the thing that was driving the situation. But beneath that, the really the racial divides in the country are I won't say they're intractable, but they don't seem any better than they did in the 1960s when supposedly everything got quote unquote better because of the civil rights movement. And the disease just magnified how unequal the country remains.

Jim: Yeah. If anything, the the inequality that that the pandemic brought out was just incredibly visible and and had some people, at least at one point in time, had some people talking about that inequality as something that maybe this country should do something about. Unfortunately, it didn't go there.

Erik: Part of it might have been the leadership that was at the helm. Obviously, there was a great article that came out, I want to say it was in The Atlantic, although not 100% sure about that, that the title of the article was The Pandemic Was a Crisis Until Trump learned about who was dying. And I think that that is partially true. But it's way too easy to just blame this on Trump or the Republicans or just the national government or even state governments about the response of the United States health system to watching, you know, poor African-American and Latinx people in Houston and Chicago and Milwaukee and L.A. and Philadelphia suffer disproportionately. And then to see how and it is, I think, even worse now in 2022 than it was in 2020, how much the wealth gap just put on top of the racial gap made stuff so much worse. And never it wasn't just that it wasn't addressed. It was like allowed to fester. It was like people just didn't care, really, you know?

Jo: Yeah. I'm looking at a passage in the book right now from Sunday, March 8th, 2020, which is when you talk about how the Internet was already full of claims that black people can't die from coronavirus in March already. Right. It was racialized really from the start.

Erik: It was in that case was the evil opposite of what we saw later on. So the I think what you're referring to is that a Cameroonian student who was in China caught coronavirus pretty early and survived and this thing came out on the Internet, put out in East Africa first. But then it ripples through Nigeria and other parts of the Internet that basically says you can't if you're black, if you have black skin, you basically cannot get coronavirus, or if you get it, you definitely won't die from it. And that immediately starts to echo around social media inside the United States as well.

Jim: From the very beginning, they should have been making the statistics available. The race specific statistics. Remember how long it took to get that before we even knew there was this this imbalance going on? It was just crazy.

Erik: That's true.

Jim: And the statistics that were being captured were terrible.

Erik: Yeah.

Jim: It was very fragmented. We had, you know, stuff coming out of Detroit. We had stuff coming out of New Orleans. It was such a fragmented effort. I don't know. I guess you stand on the president's desk and say, do something nationally or just get out of the way and then you get fired. You know.

Erik: And I think what you're pointing to is that it's not just that we have 51 separate health departments. We really have like the state health departments. But then the local health departments operate differently than the state. And the federal government has limited control over some of the

stuff. So everything yeah, the messaging was chaotic from the beginning. Nobody really knew how to trust, who to trust. And, and the stats were not clean from the, from the get go.

Jim: I have an opinion about the way we run schools in this country and all of the thousands of school boards that we have in this country. Okay.

Jo: Oh, I know you do.

Jim: Yes, I have a very real opinion about that. And anybody who knows me knows that. We saw the exact same kind of failure in the health health care system that we didn't think could happen. Okay. We really didn't.

Erik: Yeah, we didn't.

Jim: We've known about the problems with education for a long time. We did not think we had that same problem in health care.

Erik: Yeah.

Jim: Sorry. My soapbox moment there.

Jo: That's fair. I feel that way about a neighborhood associations

Jim: HOA!

Jo: Yeah. Okay. So we're talking about this book here because there's a lot about race, right? When I was reading it, obviously I lived through all this. But as you say, at one point in the in the book following all of these co-evolving crises sometimes felt like, what do you what do you say?

Erik: Drinking and drinking out of a firehose? Yeah.

Jo: Yeah. A few moments that stuck out to me were the moment that you talk about on page 65 of your book, what happens to black people who are wearing masks. This is pre George Floyd, right? But there's already this phenomenon where black people are getting stopped by police more often if they're wearing masks and you have this really striking moment where you say it seems like can either wear a mask if you're black to be safe from COVID or not wear a mask to be safe from police. That was a pretty interesting foreshadow of what, of course, then came shortly after; the murders of Breonna Taylor and Ahmed Arbery and Floyd and the protests, which you cover really nicely in the book. Another really striking moment for me was where you took the map of COVID case loads and you compared it to the map of the prevalence of slavery, and they look almost identical. Aside from those kind of big moments, what are some of the less obvious ones, but perhaps no less important ones where we might see racial inequality illustrated?

Erik: So, yeah, the Dr. Henderson in Miami getting arrested for trying to pass out masks on the streets. Right. I mean, I guess he wasn't actually he was just questioned and detained by a police officer, I think was an early indicator of how bad things were going to get over masks in particular, and over masks and race. But yeah, I mean, early and often it became clear that there was a disproportionate way in which communities of color were suffering from this disease, both from misinformation that didn't just

come from social media. It was part of common tropes. Don't get a shot, you know, doctors are not trustworthy, that kind of stuff. But also the government didn't help. The government didn't step in. There wasn't any assistance in a lot of cases. And even if you want to follow the rules, you're still going to get in trouble because there are these cultural tropes that are attached to your race that you can't get around. You grew up with them. You know that they're there. And even though this situation is different, if you're white, I don't know what else to call it, but an ideology of apartheid really in this country is such that you really, even in the midst of a pandemic, cannot break through the trope of as an African American, you have to act a certain way when an authority figure is around, even if it hurts you to act that way because there's a pandemic and you might die. It's that the racial biases of these of this country is so deeply entrenched. I mean, I think for me, one of the moments that really jumps out is May 25th. It's the day that that George Floyd is killed. I guess it was 26 and we found out about it. So the entry on the 26th, I sort of started off saying once upon a time I thought an alien invasion would bring us all together, like in the movie Independence Day, right? But here we are in the middle of a pandemic, and it seems like the old racial tropes are even deeper than the whole hey, we should all bind together in the face of this global tragedy. And that was, I hate to say, a hopeless moment, but the fact that it got it got to that level by May and it never really pulled back from that for the rest of the year, that was hard.

Jim: Is there as a as an historian, do you think there's really any hope of Americans ever getting over our exceptionalism and individualism to to do something together again?

Erik: I don't know.

Jo: Can I can I read a quote from your book, which I think is is one of my favorite paragraphs, right. It's from the day is from June 1st, which is.

Erik: Bunker Boy.

Jo: It's the bunker boy. It's the day when Trump cuts a path through BLM protesters to stage the moment where he holds up the Bible.

Erik: Yeah.

Jo: In front of the church. So you say, this is page 105. "Today was one of those days that will go down in history, no doubt. Nonetheless, as Dr. King said, we're not makers of history, but were made by history. Today was made by history as well. For most of this country's life, its citizens have been shaped by a history that whitewashed the genocide of Native Americans and downplayed the torture that supported slave labor for the global trade of cotton and tobacco that ennobled the myth of the Confederate lost cause after the Civil War, and that touted a benevolent American exceptionalism as a justification for colonizing Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. As scholars have been emphasizing since W.E.B. Dubois left a century ago, if we want to stop being destroyed over and over by the cancer of racism, the first thing we must do is to learn this real history. Only by facing the wrenching terror of the slave lock and the tribal massacre can this nation be made into something else. Otherwise, George Floyd will be just one more statistic in a nation built on the violence done to countless black and indigenous bodies."

Jim: You guys mentioned 1968, several times in the book, and to me, before I even got to one of those mentions, I'm going through the journal and I'm saying, Good God, I've lived this. Pandemic. Political

turmoil. Racial turmoil. 1968 was you know, we had them all in spades, too, I guess I was younger and more optimistic then. Now, I don't expect to outlive this this nonsense.

Erik: Yeah, history doesn't repeat, but it sure does rhyme. Right? Wow. We didn't have any really big name political assassinations in 2020.

Jim: In 2020. No, that's the main thing.

Erik: And that's basically it. And when Trump got close to dying in October of COVID, we didn't know how close he was.

Jim: Yeah

Erik: But that was probably as close to 1968 as as we could have gotten.

Jim: Yeah. But for those of you who don't know what he's talking about, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated in April. Robert Kennedy was assassinated in June during the primary season. And it was a very tempestuous time to be alive in America. The Vietnam War was being protested. The civil rights movement was extremely active and a number of protests the year before, the summer before there had been race riots in many major cities to the point that a commission was put together by the federal government. And their report finally came out saying that we know exactly what to do, but we're not going to do it anyway.

Erik: That's right.

Jim: Yeah.

Erik: I mean, as you're both pointing to, there's not a lot of hope in this book. It was it was hard to get to the end of it without having something like wonderful and nice to say. Yeah. But it was a a year of a lot of bad things happening. One right after another and the people that we interviewed in the book. And to her credit, Margaret was the person who landed most of these interviews. They didn't have a lot of good things to say either. It was just one damn thing after another for a whole year.

Jo: Yeah. What do you think is the big takeaway that you would like people to take away from this book?

Erik: I think my big takeaway is that there are these deep structures that the country is built upon and that we mistake our individual actions for these deeper structures. We think that because we are nice, that that means that racism goes away or because we listen to rap or because we, I don't know, watch a certain kind of TV show or whatever, that as long as white people do nice things, the problems of racism will get better in the United States. And I think one takeaway I hope people get from this book isn't the hopeless one that nothing will change. It's the one that says you got to work a lot harder. It's not just, let's be nice. It's not, can we all just get along? Right?. It's not that. It's that. You have to dig in to the why the system is the way that it is and begin to question those sorts of that much, much deeper level things than just the superficial behavioral things.

Jim: That brings up a really interesting point, because to get at those deeper issues, you have to contradict the laws that are being passed all across this country against teaching about those.

Erik: That's very true. Yeah. Yeah. And we both, Margaret and I, both, I think, look at this book and say, when is somebody to label it CRT? Because in a sense, that's all that it really is.

Jo: Critical race theory for those who aren't familiar with that acronym. Yeah.

Erik: It is just essentially showing how at almost every level of our society race is the one of, if not the most salient operating systems in any interaction or set of laws or basically the way that we go around our daily lives. So...

Jim: So it's not genes.

Erik: It's not genes, it's culture.

Jim: Ooooh!

Jo: What does it mean that it was two white people and historians who wrote this book? Like when people say, what, what business do you have doing this? Like, how do you explain?

Erik: I mean, it's the same answer I have when people say that about this podcast.

Jim: Yeah.

Jo: Right.

Erik: What do white people have to say about race? First of all, if it's a problem, then shouldn't everybody put their hands on deck to try to solve or at least address the problems? I mean, that's the first thing is. The second point is for years immemorial, when people are interested in addressing issues about race, people turn to the person of color in the room and say, it's your responsibility to educate everybody else about race issue, right? But we know that that is in itself a part of the structure of racism. So if we if it has to be from the mouths of somebody who has experienced it in order to understand anything about it, then it's always going to be on the shoulders of the people who've experienced it. Right. It's always going to be the responsibility of the person of color who has already been subjected to all these things through their entire life to explain it to the white people who haven't. So I think it's the job of everybody, including white people.

Jo: Okay. The book is called A Deeper Sickness. So what is the deeper sickness? Is it these structures of racism? Is that the answer? Is it other stuff?

Erik: Where do you think it is, Jo? You've read the book.

Jo: Well, on page 12 of your introduction, you kind of pull out three themes racial hierarchy, economic structure, dependent on individual accumulation of wealth, and the sort of willful forgetting of history. Do you think having now written it and gotten it out into the world, would you say that's still accurate? Is that like that's the deeper sickness?

Erik: I think those three things are the braided chord that makes America what it is. It makes white people in America act, vote and shop the way that we do. Yeah. I mean, and I think that that third one

is the one that you'll get the fewest people talking about the intentional forgetting. But I think intentional forgetting is actually part of the overall racist project of the United States, meaning that we don't often talk about the people who, and you guys know this is anthropologist better than anybody, we don't often talk about the people that preexisted Europeans on this continent. We don't talk about them as if they were real people. We talk about them as if they were just cardboard cutouts that were here that got pushed over by the pilgrims and all the other white people that showed up, right? So what we often don't do when we teach history is teach it as if the nonwhite story matters at all. It's just a kind of a foil for what George Washington did, and then eventually Abraham Lincoln and then eventually Ronald Reagan did. You know, and all the other stuff kind of gets intentionally forgotten. It's not memorialized. And if it is memorialized, it's falsely memorialized. So, yeah, I think our culture is built to forget. I think we forget much more easily now than we did. And I think sometimes, and I blame professors of history as well as other people, sometimes the kind of history that we tell is false history. It's a made up story in order to give some sort of meaning, structure, purpose and ultimately like good feelings about the United States. And what we don't do is actually tell the story of all of the people who've lived here and worked and died in this country. We just privilege the stories of a few.

Jim: Good answer.

Jo: Spoken like a true historian.

Jim: It's complicated.

Erik: It's complicated.

Jo: One of the things I kept coming back to as I was reading this book and that I'd like to hear your take on is for whom would this be most useful and interesting? And I think for me it's probably going to be future generations. And you do a good job of both of you do a good job of articulating that. you know, part of the impetus behind the book is this intentional sort of, I forget the phrase you use exactly, but like constructing an archive that isn't just dominant voices. Right?

Erik: Right.

Jo: And so in some senses, it's almost like a time capsule to me. You know, something that my kids, people who are not yet born, might sometime read in a course about the history of pandemics in 20 or 30 years, you know?

Jim: Like The Plague.

Erik: Right. Exactly.

Jo: Yeah. And if and when they do, it will be an incredible resource in terms of capturing both the events themselves and the feeling of what it was like to live through that time. What do you think? Like for whom did you write the book?

Erik: So from studying the history of epidemics, right, there is this the Holy Grail book of that particular subfield is Daniel Defoe's Journal of a Plague Year.

Jo: Mm hmm.

Erik: And many people don't know that Journal of the Plague Year is actually a fictional book that it's not a historical record. Daniel Defoe didn't write it until 1722. The events take place in 1665 and 1666. He was five years old when the plague happened, and in fact he was ferried out of London because he was one of the wealthy people. The perspective of the person in the book is somebody who stays and then sees the things as they unfold. And one of the both advantages and disadvantages of the book is that some of the scenes that are the most poignant, like the one that Monty Python makes fun of, the bring out your dead scene where there's the cart going down the street and then they throw the bodies in it. Right. He didn't see that happen. In fact, nobody saw that happen. In fact, we're not even sure that it did happen. It's just a remembrance that's made spicier by reflecting on it in such a way to make it seem even more horrible than it might have been. And of course, it is the thing that we think of when we think of the plague, we think of carts with bodies and then mass graves, right?

Jo: Yeah.

Erik: Always think of those things. Most of the time, what happens is that historians collect a bunch of sources and then try to tell a cohesive narrative. But that means that we always leave out more than we put in.

Jo: Mm hmm.

Erik: Because we know how the story ends. But how do you write an account when you don't know the story? How it ends? You're not going to know how it ends when you're in the middle of writing it. It's hard to fake that. You know, I don't know how to imagine that. So I just wanted to write that.

Jim: And then the book ends. And then we have January six.

Erik: Right? Another thing you couldn't have planned. You couldn't have written that script. Everybody be like, Nah, that's a stupid way to end the script. Oh, yeah. So there are those totally unexpected microphone dropping moments. And that's the kind of stuff that I was when you're asking about audience Jo I was trying to think No one's going to believe this, that it happened in this way. It's going to seem like historians, you know, try to build a kind of an arc. But if we're writing it in real time or reporting stuff as it comes up day after day after day, well, I mean, that gives some more credence to it, I guess. I don't know. So, yeah, your kids and your kids kids and your kids kids kids. That's who it's written for.

Jo: If we still have a planet for them to live on by that point, which is another point. Right? This is a book about the pandemic and about race, but there's a lot of other stuff. Yeah, it's way in there. Climate stuff, fires!

Erik: The double hurricane. You remember when we had the double hurricane?

Jo: Right. There's a lot.

Erik: Yeah.

Jo: Oh, can you tell us a little more about what didn't make it into the book? So what's on the website? I know that the book, it was like really, really long. Right. And you had to cut a lot.

Erik: Yeah. So we ended up writing over 220,000 words in nine months, which I didn't eat, breath, or sleep. I talked to you guys but other than that...

Jim: We had a couple of episodes.

Erik: We did and you know, there was a lot of stuff that we looked at and read that just didn't seem to fit with whatever the particular like main event of the day was, but seemed important enough or was a long lasting trend or something like that. For instance, the, do you remember the stories that came out about the post office boxes, the blue boxes on street corners that were getting lifted in advance?

Jim: Yes. Yes.

Erik: And it turned out that the whole thing was a mistake like those were, in fact, being removed to put other mailboxes down. It wasn't part of some vast conspiracy, but the story that it was part of a vast conspiracy lasted for a really long time. So once it became clear this wasn't a conspiracy, that all got removed. But it's still on the website. So there were stories that seem like, well, they didn't really fit in with whatever the main thing was, but they still had legs and people still talked about them a lot and they lasted sometimes for a long time. So that's the kind of stuff that they got put over there. The other kind of stuff that got put over there is my sometimes way too detailed musings on medical stuff that we thought in the end, like readers just weren't going to care that much about. So a lot of that goes on the website, too.

Jim: There's only so much you can say about ace2 receptors

Erik: Right? And the way that flu gets counted versus the way that coronavirus gets counted, that led to the single longest trend of the entire pandemic, which is this whole, 'but the flu kills more people than the coronavirus' thing, right? I mean, that's people are still saying that now in 2022, which blows my mind. So going down into the weeds about how the flu gets counted. For me, it was super interesting. But I don't I'm not sure that it was.

Jim: It was, yeah.

Erik: So that's all on the website, all that research and stuff. So some of the deeper dive stuff we did in the topics like the coin shortage. Do you remember the coin shortage?

Jo: Yes, now that you mention it. But I wouldn't have.

Erik: As well as every single source in the book. So if you go to deepersickness.com, you can just scroll down to the day and there's lots of days that don't appear in the paper book at all. And you can read hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of sources of stuff that happened on that day, including my least favorite part of doing this entire project. Tweets! Like hundreds and hundreds and hundreds.

Jo: One final question.

Erik: Oh oh!

Jo: So having gone through all of this, is there a particular day or section of the writing or thing that happened that kind of sticks with you more than others?

Erik: The easiest one is to say the day that we found out about George Floyd.

Jo: Hmm.

Erik: We sometimes forget that that was not the first major news item of the day.

Jo: Yeah.

Erik: There were several major things that happened on that day, and it was the accumulation of that. The by the time in the early afternoon on May 26th, that the video started to circulate in large numbers. That's when it made a whole lot of sense for people to be on the streets the night of the 26th and then the 27th and the 28th and so on and so forth. But I don't want to talk about that. What I want to talk about is the last day, December 31st. So Margaret and I were trying to figure out again, how do you put an end cap on this book? I don't know if you remember, but on Christmas Day, the 25th, there was that bomb that exploded in Nashville.

Jo: Yes...

Jo: I remember.

Jim: By the phone. Yeah.

Erik: By the AT&T building. Right. It's weird to think that, like a bomb going off in a major American city was like a minor news event compared to everything else that was happening. But it was. So we didn't want to end the book with Christmas or that kind of stuff. And there was the nonsense about protesting the election that was going on in that week after Christmas, but that had also been going on since even before the election really was over. So that was just repeating the same thing. So we decided to take a road trip. And I think for both of us, it was our first road trip, like during the entire pandemic. Because, you know, we didn't do anything with anybody. So we went through Loundes County. And one of the reasons why I went through Loundes County, Margaret did a lot of research on how that county in particular was faring in the middle of the pandemic. And the reason why that county was chosen wasn't just because it's in Alabama, but because of two other reasons. One, it was the major county that was the road from, it was on the road from Selma to Montgomery that the civil rights marchers took, that that's where they went. I don't talk about that, the actual route very much, but that's how they got from Selma to Montgomery. But the other reason is because the U.N. investigated Lowndes County as one of the poorest places on Earth, you know, comparable to places in Central America and Africa and Southeast Asia. And then we picked Schuyler County in New York as a contrast class, because Schuyler County was a rural, relatively poor, but almost white, almost entirely white. Yeah, exactly. And that was the major feature. It wasn't it wasn't class as much as it was race. And of course, we did see this, you know, very, very, very, very big difference. So we decided we would actually go to Loundes County. And the other reason why I wanted to go there is because there was this Native American village that had been there, kind of famous made into a poem back in the early 1800s. And it was this Chief that ends up fighting against Andrew Jackson at some point, or it's one of the reasons why Jackson decides to kind of annihilate the Native Americans, Alabama. Anyway, we take this road trip and that sticks with me, not just because it was a road trip during the middle of a

pandemic, but because, hey, like Lowndes County is beautiful, it's these rolling hills, these black, black dirt fields where all the cotton was grown for generation after generation after generation. And it is crazy poor. It feels like a place where, like, people just don't give a crap about Lowndes County, Alabama, you know. Then that to me gives you a kind of a sense of the priorities of the country. If you take Lowndes County and you stack it up against San Francisco or Miami or New York City. Right. You see the this massive, massive disparity on display in the United States. And then the question, of course, becomes, well, why? Why is it that people have just given up on whole sections of the United States? You know, it's a both a condemnation of the policies of the right, but it's also a condemnation of the hypocrisy of the left. You know, that nobody does anything about Lowndes County. Doesn't matter what political party they're affiliated with. So that stuck with me in part just because of this feeling of, yeah, here's an actual place, an actual existing place, not just an idea that has lived out the terrible things that we talked about all all year long.

Jo: Okay.

Erik: Well, thanks, guys.

Jo: Thanks for coming on this podcast.

Erik: All right.

Jo: It was great to have you visit us, Erik.

Erik: Why, thank you. I'm a big fan of your podcast. I listened to all episodes over and over and over again to make sure that that other guy sounds less stupid the next time.

Jim: I'm Jim, the physical anthropologist.

Jo: And I'm Jo, the cultural anthropologist.

Erik: And I'm the guy who got interviewed. I'm Erik.

Jo: You've been listening to Speaking of Race, find us on Facebook, at SORpodcast, on Twitter and Instagram at Speaking of race. And wherever you get your podcasts and.

Erik: If you want to know more about the book, you can always go on <http://deepersickness.com>. Thanks for listening.