***Nice White Parents* and the Phantom Public School**

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2020's offering from Serial Productions telegraphs its editorial perspective from the start, in its sardonic title, *Nice White Parents,* and in the statement, early in the first episode, that we've been asking "the wrong questions" about who's to blame for the lack of racial equity in US public schools. The right questions lead us to the eponymous culprit: white parents who are keen on integration as a feature of their children's public school experience, but clueless about their own clumsy, ultimately destructive power on the process of creating equitable access to public education. Even the season's new theme music, a jaunty vamp ironicised by a plinking harmonic minor scale, seems to be in on it.

The *Serial* creative team spun off from *This American Life* in 2014 with its breakout and genre-defining season examining the murder of Baltimore teenager Hae Min Lee, and the conviction of her ex-boyfriend Adnan Syed. Subsequent seasons—and the 2017 *Serial* spin-off, *S-Town*—have each taken on ambitious stories, each with their own methodological challenges self-consciously explored alongside the journalistic subject matter. The purchase by *The New York Times* in 2020 of Serial Productions for 25 million dollars (US), tells us a something about the scramble for prestige brands in the long-form audio journalism market. Serial Productions, which began as a shoestring operation, gains by the influx of the vast resources of America's paper of record. Instead of waiting two years for new seasons, fans of *Serial*'s long-form audio journalism can look forward to higher output in the coming months, including *The Improvement Association* (2021), which just dropped, and which is hosted by *This American Life* veteran Zoe Chace. Doubtless the *Times* stands to gain in market share, as its readers discover *Serial*'s expanded offerings.

Nice White Parents represents an intensification of the reflexive relationship between the object of study and the reporter's investment. Sarah Koenig's ambivalence and fascination regarding Syed's guilt or innocence made *Serial*'s debut season unusually compelling. It also made room for the partial and embodied perspectives of the podcast journalism that followed. Chana Joffe-Walt is a direct beneficiary in this five-episode story that begins with her own search, as a white parent in the New York City borough of Brooklyn, to find a public school for her own children. Joffe-Walt's insight into the story of New York City's tortured relationship to diversity in public education, is to recognise herself as part of the historical bloc implicated in the city's bad-faith relationship to equity in schooling. Like Koenig, Joffe-Walt developed her informal narrative voice during her years on the staff of *This American Life*, a public radio program turned radio-podcast hybrid that sought to "use the tools of journalism to tell the stories of everyday life" (Snyder, 2016).

The reflexivity of this approach, in less-skilled hands, could be excruciating. By 2020, we could all be forgiven for feeling a bit exhausted by the sound of white voices owning their privilege without stopping to let other voices be heard. But Joffe-Walt and the *Serial* team, including

Koenig, *Serial* executive producer Julie Snyder and *This American Life* founder Ira Glass are up to the challenge, largely due to their long experience in dogged reporting, rigorous editing, and most of all, practised on-air delivery that is more often candid than precious. Crucially, the reporting brings to the microphone non-white voices central to the story of New York City's long battle against separate and unequal public education.

Like the previous season, in which Koenig spent a year reporting on the criminal justice system in one midwestern US city, *Nice White Parents* tells the story of "one building, week by week." This time, instead of a courthouse in Cleveland, it's a middle and high school in Brooklyn, known in various eras as the School for International Studies, IS #293, and The Nathan Hale Middle School, among others. Instead of looking at a range of stories that take place within one building over the course of a year, this is the 60-year story of "an utterly ordinary, squat, three-story New York City public school building", and the many schools it has housed; each one, it turns out, shaped in ironic ways by white parents' ambivalent desire for diversity. The shift, away from intimate stories centred around a charismatic figure, like season one's Syed (or John B. McLemore in *S-Town*), and towards social structures, recapitulates *This American Life*'s evolution towards topical and controversial subject matter, "using the tools of storytelling and apply[ing] them back again to traditional journalism", in Snyder's inversion of the show's original formula.

One of the great storytelling strengths of the *This American Life* team behind the *Serial* franchise is its ability to present compelling scenes in which abstract concepts, themes and emotions come to life in an almost cinematic way. Season three's memorable elevator scene, in which Koenig waxes democratic about the way an elevator in a public building brings Americans together across lines of difference comes to mind. Koenig immediately and expertly punctures her own balloon with a self-deprecating bit of tape in which she inadvertently calls attention to the yawning cultural divides in the elevator, to everyone's discomfort. The scene—its initial hopefulness and subsequent awkwardness—provides a gem-like moment of clarity, not so much on the problem of policing and justice in Cleveland (and the USA), but on the impossibility of the project of telling stories from a position of authority and authenticity without acknowledging the social divisions inherent in the public radio structure of feeling. This acknowledgment, circa 2017, on the eve of wider reckoning within public media and the podcasting empathy-industrial complex that sprouted from it, felt refreshing.

A similar scene in the first episode of *Nice White Parents* takes place in the School for International Studies' library during a Parent-Teacher Association meeting. Joffe-Walt marvels at the gathering. The group of parents, sitting "around a wooden table in a library in a public school" evoke, for a doomed moment, the same kind of democratic hopes as Koenig's in the elevator, of a coming together in common purpose of people from disparate backgrounds. "People with vacation homes in Sonoma County and people who live in public housing", as she puts it, a class distinction that enfolds the larger racial gap which is the focus of the season. In fact, there is little common purpose or mutual understanding around that table. The scene's central drama is the revelation that the school has two competing parent groups working at cross purposes: one group, newly arrived to the school, of wealthy white parents raising big

bucks for a French language program; and the original parent-teacher association, comprised of mostly working-class Black, Latino, and Middle Eastern parents whose children had been attending the school for years. Much like Koenig's elevator, this scene ends with two groups of people shooting knowing looks at each other amidst awkward silences. Such moments have begun to feel like the emergence of a new structure of feeling for public media, podcasting and the empathy-industrial complex. In-depth investigations into inequity and failed desegregation efforts of school buildings and school systems have become a compelling sub-genre of non-fiction audio work.[1]

The episode ends with another great scene—this one at the French Cultural Services building, an Italian Renaissance-style "palazzo" in Manhattan, with "a huge marble staircase," where the wealthy white parents have staged a lavish gala fundraiser for the school's French program. The Black and Brown PTA members have showed up gamely for a night of condescension, opulence and "seventeen different cheeses". Joffe-Walt narrates with superb comic timing, and it has been edited for maximum cringiness—and less hilariously, profound cognitive dissonance. The scene ends with Susan, the Parent-Teacher Association co-president, sitting dumbstruck on a bench. "It's just hard to explain how this is a public-school fundraiser", she says.

These scenes, and arguably some from *Serial*'s famous first season, could be gathered together under the grand theme: the failure of the American experiment in public, democratic institutions. The very first scene of the episode that follows finds Joffe-Walt waxing poetic about another massive public institution: the New York Board of Education archive, housed in a massive century-old building, "arched doorways, lots of marble…vaulted ceilings". It is there, in the archive, where the story takes on a truly impressive twist. Joffe-Walt uncovers layers of white parental involvement in the School for International Studies going back to the 1960s, when the building was first planned, sited and constructed.

It turns out, the school was built several blocks closer to the white middle-class enclave of Cobble Hill than originally planned, in response to a stack of letters written by white parents eager to expose their children to a diverse educational setting. A letter from the tenant's association of the Gowanus Houses, representing a thousand mostly Black and Puerto Rican families, urged in vain for the school to be built closer to the housing project, and "the people who will actually use" the school. This last line proved prophetic. Joffe-Walt tracked down the white parents who petitioned for the school to be located closer to Cobble Hill. Not even one of them ended up sending their children to the school. Instead, they sent them to elite private schools. The almost entirely Black and Brown student body trudged the extra blocks, across busy intersections, to what was a de facto segregated school for the next 60 years. The interviews with the white parents, now in their 80s, reveal a jumble of good intentions, selective memories and cluelessness that made this white parent cringe.

[1] See for instance, *New York Times* series "Odessa (2021)," and "The Problem We All Live With" (2015); *The Promise*'s A Tale of Two Schools" (2020); *This American Life* has dedicated several shows to these themes over the years, including Harper High School (2013) and "Three Miles," reported by Jaffe-Walt (2015). Thanks to Neil Verma for this insight, that "public education racism ethnography is like the "Freebird" of radio journalism."

Joffe-Walt's archival research turns up other equally startling and predictable finds. May Mallory, a Black mother from Harlem, who sued the city's segregated schools in 1957, an effort that had "nothing to do with wanting to sit next to white folks", but for access to schools with "functional toilets, books, certified teachers, a full school day". In 1964, Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers launched Freedom Day, the nation's largest civil rights demonstration, against segregated and unequal schools which garnered a near-total media blackout. A much smaller protest by white parents against a short-lived desegregation scheme was covered widely. She also discovers a long history of the School for International Studies building housing a host of other schools, each one shaped in part by white Brooklyn parents' outsized influence and ambivalent commitment to diversity. Archival documents also reveal the city's smug sense of superiority on matters of integration relative to the American South, alongside depictions from Mallory's lawsuit of Harlem schools so decrepit and overcrowded as to rival anything she remembered from her own days in rural Alabama schools prior to the *1954 Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling by the Supreme Court, outlawing segregated schools.

The final memorable scene for the series takes place in the fifth of what was intended to be a four-episode season. The extra hour is dedicated to covering a 2017 district-wide attempt at desegregation and school equity that seems to be breaking free of the old pattern of centring white parental "consumer power" at the expense of everyone else. Joffe-Walt describes another series of public rooms, district-wide workshops for parents to provide input on the common work of planning a new school. This time, white parental power has been cleverly muted through small, tightly-controlled workshops. District administrators, catching up with long-suffering parents of colour, seem to have realised that taking away open-mic platforms for long-winded white parents in large public gatherings, deprived some oxygen to the white parental cultural authority. It actually worked, Joffe-Walt marvels. She shares her perspective with a Black parent named Neal, who was less impressed with the white parents 'coded racism in the workshops, which he expertly mimics in a honking "white person voice".

Neal's coda is a fitting last-minute swerve from optimism, part of the bracing dialectic movement animating *Nice White Parents's* historical sweep. There will be no end to these ironic scenes of participatory democracy collapsing in on themselves. Nor will there be an end to the eternal hope that inspires them. The public is a vexed and impossible concept, but it is one "we cannot do without", as Bruce Robbins put it (1989). As public radio stations and their podcast progeny wrestle with their own experiments in equity, amidst the corporate "enclosure" of what was once a fully public media ecosystem, we can look forward to more difficult scenes and deeper archival insights. And, one hopes, we can listen out for newfound stratagems for limiting the ubiquity and agenda-setting power of white voices.

References

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