2014

You Are the Minority

Annemarie Menna
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/intertext
Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol22/iss1/21

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intertext by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
YOU ARE THE MINORITY

Annemarie Menna

I wobbled through the doors of the WHYY, Inc. offices on my heels and introduced myself to the secretary. She gestured to the waiting area, a collection of four black chairs and a glass coffee table, and made a phone call. I pulled my bag onto my lap as I sat down and adjusted my blazer. WHYY was a prestigious Philadelphia public radio station affiliated with NPR and home of award-winning journalist Terry Gross. It was also my last hope for a summer internship. I was early for a scheduled interview with Craig, the media education director.

I sat in one of the black chairs and waited, listening to whichever news radio show played over the sound system in the lobby that hour. A female host was in the process of interviewing a lawyer about the “stop-and-frisk” policy in New York City. The lawyer—also a woman—was one of several defending the policy in court on behalf of the New York City Police Department.

“Stop-and-frisk” was a familiar phrase, and in the summer of 2013, it became a highly contested topic. It was widely claimed that “stop-and-frisk” policies could not be racially charged when the intent was to protect members of the community. This including those blacks and Latinos living in the same neighborhoods canvassed by police using “stop-and-frisk.” More than four million people were stopped, resulting in the removal of guns from the streets, caches of drugs found, and untold lives saved, according to U.S. News & World Report.

The interview quickly fell to pieces. The host latched on as the lawyer evaded questions in an effort to remove herself from the air.

“I’ve noticed that there are no minorities represented on the team of defendants,” she said. “Is that fair representation?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” the woman replied. “We are just as capable of defending or validating ‘stop-and-frisk’ in court as any one person.”

“But you don’t think that is misrepresenting a group? Have you consulted any members of the black community, other than those in court?”

“We are doing our best to conduct the case...
in a clear and unbiased manner.”

“But you don’t think that’s the problem?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Just as the host conducting the interview was on the verge of losing all sense of impartiality to call the lawyer a racist, Craig came down the stairs, shook my hand, and led me to his office.

Stephanie was a large, black woman with a loud voice and a single, consistently raised eyebrow. She meant business in a way that said she took no prisoners, especially among us, her employees. She could hold an auditorium full of sixteen year olds to college students in silence.

Stephanie ran the local Say Yes to Education chapter in Syracuse, New York, an organization where exactly one day a week, for three hours a day, I boarded a school bus with five other Syracuse University students and tutored English at an inner-city high school. Which student I had might vary depending on the week. Almost no one was consistent. When the building supervisor was in, she would roam the halls after the final bell and haul all those enrolled in the tutoring program back to the classroom. Sometimes a teacher would knock on the door, the shirt-sleeve of a sheepish sophomore clutched in one fist. “Can you help him?” they’d ask. “He doesn’t understand his homework.” Or occasionally, “Can you help him? He can’t fail his Regents again.”

In the state of New York, all public school students must pass Regents Exams in order to graduate high school. Michael Bloomberg has touted the Regents as the spark behind higher graduation rates and better education, but what he fails to admit are that the standards of the Regents have been lowered. In short, students are taught the test. In 2010, the effects of this were disheartening, at best: only 61 percent of students passed their math exam, and just over half of students—53 percent—passed the English exam.

In her book *The New Jim Crow*, civil rights advocate and writer Michelle Alexander would contribute this statistic to what she calls “the famous ‘birdcage’ metaphor” (184). The birdcage is a societal structure, an example of institutionalized racism, something that the students—black inner-city youth—were undoubtedly familiar with. Education, particularly public school education among black and minority students, is only one part of the cage constructed from the intertwining wires that symbolize Alexander’s varying forms of structural violence. We can throw our suffering public school system in with the laws, institutions, and practices that she cites as the consequences of Ronald Reagan’s infamous “War on Drugs,” a war that has contributed
astronomically to mass incarceration.

Although I had certainly heard of them, I didn’t witness any arrests or brawls in the hallways at ITC High School in Syracuse. Instead, I found multiple students failing the Global History section of their Regents Exams. The frustrating part was that many of these students were incidentally, systematically, and indirectly set up to fail. Eventually I was taken off teaching Global History and assigned to Noah, a young black ninth grader who was notorious among the tutors for his inability to sit still. Noah did not want to attend tutoring. He had no one encouraging him to go, no teacher to drag him to the classroom by his shirtsleeves. He had already failed the ninth grade.

But Noah was brilliant. We quickly left behind his homework assignment to quiz each other on books. He wanted my opinion on a series I told him I read when I was in ninth grade. He told me which characters he disliked, which ones were excessively whiny, and which sequels he had lined up to read.

I learned that Noah lived with several younger cousins in a house with his parents. I didn’t know where Noah’s older brother was, though I knew he wasn’t in school. Noah’s father, an army reservist, was angry if his son wasn’t waiting at the curb when he arrived to pick him up from tutoring.

Noah attended tutoring for three weeks. After March, I didn’t see him. He stopped in once to say he was acting in a school play.
Upon entering my second year with Say Yes, I fully expected to see Noah again. I didn’t. The birdcage limiting Noah had already begun to shrink. I didn’t realize what Stephanie had told us was entirely true: “These are inner-city black kids and Latino kids. Here, they are not the minority. You are the minority here. If you remember anything, remember that.”

Walking through the corridors of ITC that second year, I was very aware of my whiteness, my clothing. How outnumbered I was. It had never occurred to me before, until I noticed the stares. I was ignorant of race because I had never felt pressured, obligated, or forced to notice its presence. It was a given that I would finish high school, pass standardized tests, and attend college. It was a given that I would have the ability to pay for it.

There I was, a sophomore in college. Where was Noah?

There were two required Say Yes orientations a year, one in September and one in January. That September, I sat in an auditorium with fifty other students. We were each given a blue folder with reams of pamphlets and flyers plastered with infographics.

Stephanie stood at the podium and switched on the projector. A YouTube video titled “KJ’s Reaction to UC Berkeley Acceptance” flickered to life on the whiteboard and the lights dimmed.

A high school student hunched over an Apple MacBook with what we can assume is the rest of his family. He clicked through a couple pages before losing himself to screams of exhilaration: he jumped from the kitchen onto the sofa, bouncing from end to end, before he ripped open the window and continued to scream.

Stephanie brought the lights back up and there were tears in her eyes. I froze, shocked at the sight of this impressive woman choking on any emotion other than hard-lined defiance. “We can do that,” she said. “We can do that for these kids. We can get them that acceptance letter. With your help, we can do that.”

Say Yes has many goals. It can also claim to have many successes. I never saw any of them. I saw an empty classroom for most of my time with Say Yes. After my first three weeks with Noah, I had one student. One. In two years. For the remaining five months, I sat in the recently renovated library of ITC High School with ten other tutors and not a single student. The program has been hailed by eminent members of society, including Chancellor Nancy Cantor and President Obama, but students like Noah are falling through the cracks, fast-tracking to the streets.

Noah’s story is a familiar one, though perhaps he is better off here than most. Last I knew, Noah was still attending ITC, but say he stopped going to class. Each morning, he wakes up and leaves the house. He hides from his father that he is skipping school. Eventually, his father discovers this and is angrier with
Noah than usual. Noah begins spending more time outside the house with friends, friends he once described as prone to occasionally dabble with drugs. Noah, a smart kid who likes James Patterson books, becomes involved with drugs.

Of course, it is never so simple or so linear. Michelle Alexander explains the link between black youth, incarceration, and the vitriol behind the drug war. Reagan’s “War on Drugs”—publicized and over-hyped to the point of hysteria—has institutionalized racism in a way that has altered how we value human beings. The system is stacked against a collective of people because we value numbers more than relationships or growth. Test scores, arrests, guns confiscated, and drugs seized—all quantitative.

Noah’s chances of becoming one of 20,000 young black men in prison are higher than him earning a Bachelor’s degree. Noah has a greater chance of being on parole than he does being in a theater class at Syracuse University. Noah is more likely to forfeit his personal freedom and responsibility to a racially quantitative statistic than I am.

Alexander is right—we as a society have barred an entire population of a certain skin color from achieving what they want out of life. We—I—never asked them what they wanted.

How did we—white, middle class America—come to this crossroads? We insisted that we were doing the right thing to keep our neighborhoods safe and clean. We rigged the education system and left children behind. We divided ourselves. We created a caged environment and a double standard, whites versus blacks. For what?

As a white, middle-class college student bred in the suburbs of Philadelphia, I will never understand what it is to be targeted because of my skin color. I will never know what it is to be asked to step off the sidewalk and submit to a search. If I ever was, and I was caught with marijuana, I would never see the inside of a prison cell. Noah would.

This past summer, during the “stop-and-frisk” debates raging in New York City, I had successfully secured a teaching internship at WHYY. I and several other interns under Craig assisted in a classroom of fifteen to thirty students whose parents paid a couple thousand dollars in course fees. It was a journalism camp; of course they kept updating their phones, waiting for the Zimmerman decision in the Trayvon Martin trial. Of course they knew about DOMA. But I never expected any of them to know of “stop-and-frisk.” Why would they? Their parents worked next door at the American College of Physicians. They shopped at Kate Spade outlets and browsed the J. Crew website in the computer lab. They were going to college.

It was roughly two in the morning on a Saturday. I had a water bottle of rum in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I was talking to a boy whose nametag read “Lars,” an appropriately nineties-era name for the theme of the party. Thirty twenty-year-olds were dancing frenetically to house music on property owned by Syracuse University. Red cups littered the backyard and apartment.

“Hey, Annie,” said Laura as she stumbled out of the back door of the house. “Do you want to go back to my apartment after this and smoke weed with me? I already talked to Kim, and she’s going to come, too.”

Without hesitation, I said, “Sure, why not?”

The night continued and we left just as the last bus pulled out of South Campus. I felt secure, knowing that no police officer would arrest me with the smell of alcohol on my breath. I was vulnerable and cold in my tank top and jeans. If the police saw me walking alone towards campus, they would escort me home. They would walk me to the front door. They would let me go.