

What Does it Mean to Be in the Audience for Untold Stories? A Response to Christopher J. Lebron

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Thanks are due to Professor Lebron; through his thoughtful work and this essay, he has a habit of keeping me on my toes. I am pleased to have the opportunity to engage with him and with my colleague, Ron Glass, whom I thank for softening the philosophical ground under the argument. In this response, I will be going down a more narrative path, asking myself what it means to be an “audience” to Chris Lebron.

I do have a few questions; in this space, there is not room enough to get to the bottom of them all. I *will* say that I am provoked by Professor Lebron’s opening focus on equality as a destination for a set of civic demands. I do not hear an embrace of a rights-based argument as much as one that depends on a moral claim of some sort by a person (in this article presumably a Black person or persons) who is deprived of some form of equality to which they are entitled.

Professor Lebron uses two examples in his article: a pickup basketball game and a co-worker narrative and communicative invitation about unequal treatment. In the first example, he interrupts his analogy with a suggestion of how common activity, with an acceptance of commonly understood rules, might become demonstrably unfair by assigning unequal burdens. I actually think the analogy can perhaps be sharpened around its dimensions of specifically racial inequality by moving from a basketball court to a court of law and looking at equity as commonly constructed in U.S. educational contexts. In part I want to change the framing to a reading of sites set up to buttress structural injustice in education. And then I want to add back in human responses to the experience of in-

equality—(the unlistening audience from Lebron)—that may manifest as unfair treatment, unjust institutions, or erasure. Those experiences, I need not remind you, of our ‘shared’ politics, culture, and social life rest on an equally ‘shared’ history of white supremacy and the demands of capital. The acceptance of the consequences of both that history and demand requires the massive erasure of certain stories.

I recently attended a “cold reading” of Joshua Harmon’s play, *Admissions*, which Syracuse Stage, our very own LORT-C theatre, inserted into a mini-festival to assess whether it should be part of a future season.¹ The play, which has been mounted in New York City, Washington, DC, and London, was the subject of a talkback after the show in order to gauge audience reaction.

The action of the play takes place at Hillcrest, an elite but second-tier New England boarding/prep school, whose Headmaster, Bill Mason, is married to the Admissions Director, Sherri. In the first scene of the play, Sherri admits to her older administrator, Roberta, who has been at Hillcrest since her own father was headmaster, that the work of inclusion and diversity is not yet done, although she is pleased at her success. She admonishes Roberta about her draft of the new admissions brochure, featuring only three pictures of students of color out of fifty-two. She is looking to market the diversity of Hillcrest, modest though it may be; Roberta believes her version to be more reflective of reality.

Sherri has labored throughout her fifteen-year tenure at Hillcrest to increase the diversity of the predominantly white student body, and she is finally enjoying the fruits of these efforts as the percentage of minority students for the incoming class has finally approached the twenty percent mark. Her spasms of self-congratulation are interrupted by the letter her Hillcrest senior son, Charlie, has received from Yale, his first-choice school, deferring his early admission into the regular cycle.

Her professional glee is further depressed by news of the simultaneous early acceptance into Yale by Charlie's best friend Perry, whose father is a Black faculty member at Hillcrest.

When she and her husband finally see their son later that night, they find Charlie feeling paralyzed by conflicting feelings of self-pity, frustration, anger, self-loathing, and disappointment. He has been brought up by his liberal parents in a bubble of privilege in which their professional commitments to inclusion and affirmative action has heretofore had only spectator-distance warm and fuzzy effects on his life. His best friend is biracial, but he's been taught not to see color; in the moment he finds out that his friend has gotten something (admission) that he has been conditioned to believe is *his* natural right, Perry becomes 'Black.' Charlie and his parents break out into a ferocious dispute over how to go forward. Charlie launches a fifteen-minute diatribe about all the ways he has been misled about the relationship between his understood specialness and the dismantling of the assumptions of privilege translated from Hillcrest to Yale *qua* the real world. We find out that in addition to the admissions slap, he has been harboring resentment about being "overlooked" for the Editor-in-Chief position at the school newspaper, which went to a female student that Charlie believes is less qualified. In the face of his breakdown, his mother, the so-called "Social Justice Warrior" is, ironically, willing to call in favors and nepotistic contacts and to do what is necessary to "restore" the *natural* order of things, which all of a sudden is in opposition to her life's work.

Once Sherri's maternal inclinations are at war with her stated commitments, the audience is invited to consider that *all* her liberal piety is hypocritical and ultimately useless. As a side note, Harmon's play centers the intra-family conflict of values and obligation; however, the real nexus of social and cultural complexity is in the friendship between

Sherri and Perry's mother, Ginny, who at the beginning of the play is her best friend. Ginny exposes the divergent roles that intellectual understanding and emotional labor play when the subject is race and white privilege. As presented to the normative theatre going audience (white, moneyed, educated), the play evokes gently derisive laughter and loud applause, without seemingly a concomitant examination of just how much the play endorses a retreat from racial justice, if not out-and-out racism.

In a class I taught on civil rights in education, we spent two hours deconstructing the arguments around the lawsuit on behalf of Asian American applicants against Harvard.² That class session took place after discussions about legal strategies across the U.S. geographically and historically to exclude or to segregate various populations of children in schools—including Chicax students in Texas cases going back to the 1920s and Chinese American students in California—sometimes using arguments about English language proficiency, sometimes housing segregation, sometimes just defining those students as White so that school districts could not be deemed in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Those cases (like the *Harvard* case) often had the effect of setting the various interests of students of color against one another or setting up intra-group disputes. Their shared understanding prior to the course most often rested primarily on *Brown v. Board*, not set in the context of other K-12 race discrimination cases, much less higher education cases.³ Beginning with *Bakke*, those higher education admission cases were constructed with a view to eliminating consideration of the historical backdrop of injustice and injury.⁴

As we talked about the *Harvard* case, I walked them through my own experience (as an admissions officer at Dartmouth College) with elite admissions as a way of connecting the history of Jewish quotas, the careful treading when the Ivies went co-ed, and the ways they recruited

and continue to recruit international students and domestic students of color—all as essential mechanisms of social universe maintenance. Then when I saw the play, my immediate critique was that all the mentioned characters of color were objects, props, for the white characters to justify their actions and beliefs. In answer to the question of whether Syracuse Stage should produce the play, I thought if SU students of color saw the play, they would likely feel that the characters—especially the son—were taking off the filters and saying out loud what their own classmates and teachers think of them on the daily.⁵ Even if the intention of the playwright was to expose the hypocrisy of the parents, the emotional effects might well rest on the unanswered resentments in that skillfully rendered (long) speech in the middle of the show. Only one character even speaks about the experiences, critiques, or pains of the Black referents: the mom of the biracial son. Ginny informs her now-former friend about the horrible experiences the “most successful Black graduate” had while a student at Hillcrest. She offers an alternate account of his subsequent lack of alumni contact and donations, based on her position as an audience to his pain, in contrast to Sherri’s reading of that student’s ‘ingratitude’ after *all she and Hillcrest did for him*.

That experience, the effects of the “work of whiteness,” however woke or retrograde, is the absent presence in the play. However, the real world did provide a front seat to the role of the audience when the Operation Varsity Blues scandal broke the week after I saw the play. I wish I could go deep, hard, and long on the Operation Varsity Blues scandal. There is no question that this is not just about what rich people do, or the difference between old money and the arrivistes, or the crime being about degrees of underservedness via test scores (although those side roads are not uninteresting). When *Forbes Magazine* breathlessly designated (Kardashian sibling) Kylie Jenner as the youngest ever “self-made” billionaire we should have already been alerted to the profound cultural

morass of incomprehension about meritocracy, class, and the effects of privilege in which we find ourselves.⁶

Race and the seemingly indestructible edifices of white supremacy around which our social goods, including education, are built are at the heart of this “scandal.” The lengths to which these parents were willing to go (along with the quite acute understanding of the architects of the scheme about class and parental anxieties) are but a reflection of a wish NOT for equality, but for what is understood as deserved even if unearned.

Lebron’s second example of the traffic stop, with its subsequent request from Darryl that his coworker form his audience to hear the unfairness of his treatment, reminded me that Perry, the unseen biracial Hillcrest student, does not get to tell his own story in *Admissions*. His best friend resents him and calls his success into question. Perhaps that is because he is less important as a *person* than as an avatar for the untold number of students of color in California who have been legally excluded from UCLA or USC, for example, because race is not a proper category for social enquiry. Meanwhile, capital—both inherited (old money) and acquired by running banks, the media, corporations, and tech (new money)—with all the attendant privilege, as always provides the conditions for the audience to hear pain, desperation, and demand for fair treatment for those who have *always* had fairness and more. This absence from this particular story is, even so, *far* less violent than the disproportionate and literal absence of Black males (with even higher numbers for those with a diagnosed disability) from classrooms around the country. They cannot even get an audience with an admissions office—only with a judge.

1 Joshua Harmon, *Admissions* (New York: Samuel French, 2018).

2 *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 346 F. Supp. 3d (D. Mass. 2018).

3 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Brown I), 347 U.S.483 (1954).

4 *Regents of Univ. of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978).

5 This article was written before the student protests following ten racist incidents on campus at Syracuse University in the fall of 2019, detailed on social media at #NotAgainSU.

6 Natalie Robehmed, “At 21, Kylie Jenner Becomes the Youngest Self-Made Billionaire Ever,” *Forbes* (March 5, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2019/03/05/at-21-kylie-jenner-becomes-the-youngest-self-made-billionaire-ever/#6fb89e682794>.