CONTENTS

Introduction

Arvand is a Middle Eastern American public radio employee in the United States.[1] I talked to him via Zoom in summer 2020 about his work as a public radio producer, editor, and broadcaster. He was working from home, as were most reporters at the time, given the COVID-19 pandemic. By the time we hopped on the video call, Arvand had had a long day—a long few years, in fact. He'd noticed in those years, his first in public radio, that he regularly heard nonwhite accents differently than his white colleagues did. When I asked him about the accents that made it onto the public radio program he worked for, he told me,

> People will still openly say, "We can't have that person on. Their accent is just too much." And then you go and listen, and you're like, "What are you *talking* about?" I understand everything they're saying. [. . .] It's almost like I'm looking through a different prism at the world than a white person. That's where it gets spooky and weird because we're hearing the same thing and hearing it completely differently.

Voice recordings from immigrants and communities of color sounded clear to him, while his white colleagues interpreted the same voices as unclear and, by consequence, unfit for airtime. Arvand mused that perhaps he was just better at understanding accents because his own parents had "heavy accents," then decided it couldn't be that alone:

> But no. I got Black colleagues who didn't grow up with that heavy accent. I don't consider any Black folks I know to have the accent my parents

> do. My parents literally speak broken English. But even my Black colleagues heard it the way I did. There's something weird happening. That happens a lot.

Voice and narrative evaluations centered around a presumed white listener impact who (and what) makes it on air. During another interview, Sarah, a Latinx[2] reporter, told me she regularly faced pushback for how she reported on communities of color without a white referent. She told me,

> I know that I was hired to help us diversify our airwaves, help us diversify our audience. But I literally had a news director tell me—I made a pitch—and they literally asked me, "Why do white people care?"

This news director's reaction brings with it the suggestion to shift the sound of the piece immensely. If Sarah were to take their advice, first she would need to effectively justify her story, including a "hook" drawing an imagined white listener into caring about an issue largely internal to a racially minoritized community. Second, she might have to add in music or background sound design that fit that hook. Third, Sarah would need to include voices from outside the racially minoritized community she was reporting on, diluting the story for the benefit of a majority-white listenership.

Such an editorial orientation has ripple effects. The voices and stories available on air shape whether and how people feel they belong on public radio's airwaves and in the public debate. Take for instance Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika, a journalism professor at New York University and a podcast creator. He had an unsettling experience when producing one of his first public radio–style pieces. Kumanyika, a Black[3] man, was not inexperienced at a microphone—he had been a DJ and rapper for over a decade at that point—but he found someone else's voice in his head: a mix of white public radio personalities like Roman Mars and Sarah Koenig.[4] In January 2015, in his "vocal color manifesto," Kumanyika described this sensation, which he attributed to the whiteness of public radio in the United States. He declared that the marginalization of nonwhite voices had, over time, shaped and curtailed the nonwhite stories available on the public airwaves.

Public radio in the United States espouses an egalitarian mission to serve all Americans through both news-based and cultural programming. What remains invisible, or inaudible, in this mission is the purveyor of the content. In the most traditional conception of radio journalism, the broadcaster is presumed to be an objective mouthpiece from which a diverse array of stories will flow.

And in some ways, public radio has broken this mold of an authoritative voice from nowhere. For example, in its over five decades of operation, it has been both critiqued and complimented for featuring prominent and influential white women broadcasters, for whom listeners have developed warm feelings and a sense of trusted connection. As an unprecedented number of nonwhite broadcasters have entered this space since the turn of the twenty-first century, however, their experiences have exposed the limits of the public radio industry's pathbreaking approach.

Public radio employees of color I spoke with for this project[5] routinely told me that the distinct public radio sound was unmistakably white. When I asked them to elaborate, I would sometimes get sonic descriptions, like a "nasally thin sound." For the most part, however, they would conjure up an image related to how a particular voice would make a white person feel: "a friendly, nonthreatening person"; "a white person"; or "somebody white people would like."

Descriptions like this are shifting, imprecise, and elusive. Yet the widespread association of the "public radio voice" with a narrow social group, even if the voice itself does not empirically index onto a neat set of linguistic conventions, tells us a great deal about power. We know from sociology and linguistic anthropology that utterances only receive their value—their symbolic capital and recognition by others as legitimate—when there is a structurally conditioned understanding of who can speak certain words in certain ways with authority.[6] And so white voice, or understandings of a voice as white, receives its power because of its synonymousness with authority and trustworthiness. The long-held association of public radio voice with whiteness consistently sets racialized standards that mark those heard as audibly nonwhite as not belonging on these official and respected airwaves.

When Kumanyika's vocal color manifesto took off on Twitter in early 2015, National Public Radio (NPR)'s *Code Switch* podcast dedicated its inaugural episode to the topic. Accompanied with #pubradiovoice as the conversation marker, prominent employees of color in public radio engaged with the piece and shared their experiences. It became clear that constructing an on-air identity in a historically white-dominant industry and company involved complex considerations for nonwhite broadcasters. Lourdes "Lulu" Garcia-Navarro, a Latinx host on public radio programming at the time, responded, "Sitting in host chair for first time I channeled white voice from [the] Midwest and lost my own. I had to fight my own brain!" Audie Cornish, a Black broadcaster and then host of *All Things Considered*, pointed out that her own voice often got confused as a "white one" and that "people

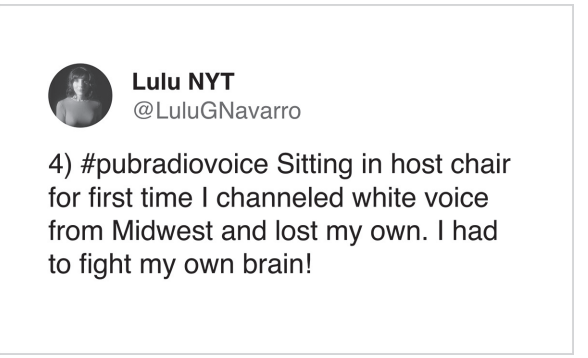

FIGURE 1: #pubradiovoice tweet by Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, January 2015. Source: Twitter.

usually don't react to my voice, they react to their google image search:)." In writing about their relationships to their own voices, these women of color highlighted the fact that there was—and is—a "voice of public radio," and that it was always presumed white.

Garcia-Navarro's and Cornish's tweets demonstrate how this idea of public radio's model voice stokes feelings of nonbelonging for workers of color. It happens even if their voices fit the network: as Cornish described, listeners experience a sort of dissonance when they look up her photo. Her identity as a nonwhite reporter didn't seem to fit with the assumed whiteness of the iconic public radio voice.

I learned a lot from public statements like these: public radio journalists of color speaking out about their experiences both on Twitter and within some of the NPR programming itself. But as I began my graduate studies in fall 2016, well over a year after Kumanyika's vocal color manifesto found its way into mainstream conversations, I found scant academic research that reflected these employees' poignant articulations of their own relationships to their voices vis-à-vis the voice of public radio.

This book sets out to fill that gap. I systematically delve into the factors producing this discrepancy between Arvand's and his white colleagues' reactions to voice. I show that it is the arrival of employees from communities of color into this white institutional space that produces this mismatch—it is a breaching of an underlying and unspoken set of aesthetic norms and storytelling practices embedded deep within US public radio's foundations. The employees I spoke with do not just passively absorb industry norms and practices. Instead, workers of color like Arvand often take on additional

FIGURE 2: #pubradiovoice tweet by Audie Cornish, January 2015. Source: Twitter.

complex creative labor to expand who and what gets heard on public radio. In other words, they resist in order to enrich the airwaves, often at great personal cost.

Some might wonder why I've chosen to focus on public radio. There has been a proliferation of news outlets and a fracturing of news consumption in the past two decades, especially in the digital age. But NPR, unlike other outlets, is what Rosina Lippi-Green calls a "dominant bloc institution"[7]: its position in American radio broadcasting is enshrined in legislation, and it has been in operation as a national network for over fifty years. Its network consists of more than two hundred affiliate stations on the local level, which are funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and air NPR programming. In addition to its broad reach, the well-documented decline of local print journalism[8] and the threat this poses to responsive journalism that is connected to the communities it serves[9] has made the public radio industry increasingly important as one of the last vestiges of local investigative journalism; if the public press is a bedrock of democracy, and if NPR is a bedrock of the public press, it stands to reason that NPR's content, and public radio's content more broadly, is crucially important to the polity.

Public radio's reputation as a voice seeking to "reflect America," coupled with the narrower linguistic patterns of its output, maintains the notion that there is an ideal, standardized language. The tension between the network's broad mission and narrow practice raises questions about who can be heard in the public sphere. As Christopher Chávez puts it in his book *The Sound of Exclusion*, "Despite its mandate to reach a broader public, NPR has consistently delivered programming to a narrow audience of educated,

middle-class white listeners. By situating whiteness and privilege in its center, however, NPR has consistently moved minority audiences to the periphery."[10]

Understanding the Public Radio Industry as a White Institutional Space

Now let's dig into what public radio is. I conceptualize the public radio industry in the United States as a white institutional space.[11] This conceptualization includes NPR as an organization, the local public radio stations that have NPR memberships (its network), and the other nonprofit public radio distributors American Public Media and Public Radio Exchange. This set of organizations shares an egalitarian mission to serve the American public through a combination of news-based and cultural programming. Yet, as communications scholars Jack Mitchell and Jason Loviglio have noted, public radio content has taken on popularity with the American professional-managerial class, who are treated as identifiable listener-members who form a large part of the public radio listening community.[12] There has also been a societal recognition of public radio's aesthetic[13] and voice[14]; the iconic public radio voice has been indexed as mirroring the comforts and tastes of predominantly white, professional-class listener-members.[15] The mismatch defies recent efforts by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Public Radio, and other public radio distributors to become more accountable to marginalized communities.[16]

But what do I mean by "white institutional space"? Space, rather than being a neutral concept, is politically and historically constructed, and spaces dominated by white cultural frameworks reproduce ideologies of white supremacy over nonwhite communities.[17] George Lipsitz and other scholars of white space extend this to consider how white ideologies are "inscribed in the physical contours or the places where we live, work and play."[18]

Organizational policy and practice can serve as the mechanisms that maintain white institutional space, even in organizations that embrace diversity and pluralism. Amanda Lewis and John Diamond, in their analysis of a well-funded suburban school in the American Midwest, show the endurance of Black-white achievement gaps despite the school's policies and values surrounding racial integration.[19] That is, the school is racially integrated, and its policies and rules are race neutral. However, organizational practices lean on existing schemas about potentiality and talent, and so the school,

in practice, sorts gifted and talented students by race and entrenches the achievement gap.

White dominance pervades many other common meso-level practices: job market sorting,[20] normative structures and ways of thinking within organizations, and workplace labor distribution[21] among them. Joan Acker, a prominent scholar of gender and work, asserts that patriarchy, capitalism, and racism interlock in organizations to form "inequality regimes."[22]

I build upon and extend work that takes racism seriously as a structuring force in organizational and institutional life by illustrating how racism structured the historical development of the organizational form, policies, and practices of the National Public Radio network. Specifically, I consider how NPR is a racialized organization.[23] I then connect the historical formation of NPR's structure, policies, and practices to worker experiences today across the entire industry, not only NPR.

Public broadcasting in the United States has a robust archive that makes such a connection possible. The National Public Broadcasting Archive is a collection of documents established by the original authorizing legislation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The archive, located at the University of Maryland, College Park, contains official documents, collections of informal intraorganizational and interorganizational correspondence, oral history interviews by institutional leaders in public broadcasting, and papers of interest from former employees at NPR and the CPB, dating back to the earliest days of the public broadcasting system.

These documents offer an account of organizational formation and practice over time. The archive, then, presents an opportunity to trace the formation of a racialized organization. How did the founders interpret the mandate to serve all Americans? What were the political and economic forces that shaped its foundation and persistence? What did the founders care about preserving when it came time for budget cuts?

This book goes beyond identifying the mechanisms that produce racial disparities in organizational life to emphasize points of contingency. By points of contingency, I mean the instances in which government bureaucrats, organizational founders, and managers made choices that entrenched or reinforced mechanisms of racial exclusion in the first place. Without identifying these actions, racial inequality seems to be generated "without racists,"[24] or at least without racial intent.[25] At each turn in the development of public radio that I document in the book, it is important to consider: Can we imagine government bureaucrats, founders, or managers making different decisions with different outcomes?

The policies and practices those government bureaucrats, founders, and managers chose had an enduring impact on public radio's story production process. Organizational policy decisions and their implementation accumulate to shape the contemporary experiences of people of color in public radio. How does the public radio industry's status as a white institutional space shape the evaluative processes within?

THE ROLE OF VOICE EVALUATION IN CULTURAL PRODUCTION

The human voice often serves as a marker of social distinction or social otherness. People infer class, race, and gender via a person's dialect,[26] and there is robust scholarship that points to how these inferences can lead to linguistic discrimination with material consequences. Sociological research on inequality has identified linguistic discrimination as one mechanism by which landlords and employers exclude nonwhite applicants when they seek resources from white institutional spaces. Urban sociologists Douglas Massey and Garvey Lundy demonstrate that racial discrimination in housing can begin at the moment of a phone call,[27] drawing on linguistic research demonstrating that Americans infer race via dialect.[28] Tracking linguistic discrimination is an effective way to identify racial discrimination in white space. But how and why does linguistic discrimination along racial lines form?

In contrast to the traditional sociological canon, linguistic anthropologists and interdisciplinary race scholars take seriously the co-constitution of racial ideologies and ideologies of language. Sara Trechter and Mary Bucholtz assert that studying whiteness through linguistic analysis goes beyond content to see how white norms are coded in language practices.[29] They find that linguistic analysis is a missing dimension of whiteness studies, and they call for a study of linguistic form as a way of looking at how whiteness and white racial dominance is constructed, in part, linguistically. Linguistic anthropologists Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa coined the term "raciolinguistic ideologies"[30] as an analytic concept to account for the ways in which linguistic norms are racialized by the socially conditioned, hegemonic white listening ear that shapes what can(not) pass as professional, trustworthy, or authoritative in public discourse.[31] From this perspective, it becomes clear that white institutional space, in making whiteness a credential, devalues markedly nonwhite linguistic performance. As anthropologist Jane Hill has shown, the process of racializing language makes public space into "white space" via voice evaluation.[32]

Ethnomusicologist Allie Martin demonstrates this process in her analysis of a 2018 municipal bill in Washington, DC, introduced to discourage street musicians from disturbing residents and workers in gentrifying Chinatown. Martin argues that the introduction and support of the bill singled out Black musical traditions, for instance brass bands and other Black sound traditions, when considering which music or performance was deemed disruptive. The bill, then, serves as a continuation of the ways "Black sonic creation has been consistently stigmatized and subsequently punished." Martin makes the stakes clear when she notes that "we are unable to understand how people build their worlds through music and sound if we are unable to listen to their multitudes, to the ways in which they impose and are imposed on in different forms."[33]

Turning this insight from public space to media representations, it is also evident that mainstream and popular shows are secured as "white space" through vocal stereotyping. For example, the well-known and long-running cartoon program *The Simpsons* faced critique after decades of using a stereotyped brown voice created by a white actor, Hank Azaria, as an Indian convenience store owner[34]; Azaria developed the voice in response to producers asking, "basically, how offensive can you make it?"[35] The critiques of Azaria's voicing of Apu received mainstream attention through a documentary, *The Problem with Apu*,[36] which connected comedian Hari Kondabolu's encounter with the cartoon character Apu to larger issues of how sonic brownface takes a psychic toll on those stereotyped by the process. While Azaria stepped away from the role in the months following the height of public critique, his ability to publicly use a mock "brown" voice in both *The Simpsons* and in public appearances[37] without pushback demonstrates the power of white institutional space to reinforce white supremacy through racial stereotyping of nonwhite voices.

Voice evaluation, then, is subject to the norms produced by the white institutional space in which the evaluation is taking place. In the cultural industries, similarly to the white public space that Jane Hill analyzes, nonwhite voices are stereotyped and commodified. Sociologist Nancy Wang Yuen documents, for example, how casting directors imagine and evaluate particular voices for different racial/ethnic groups, such as Asian actors of different nationalities.[38]

By analyzing the voice as an object of racialized evaluation, my analysis of public radio production processes in the second part of this book reveals the role of the Du Boisian sonic color line in the workplace. Adopting W.E.B. Du Bois's prognosis of the color line being the greatest problem of the twentieth

century, sound studies scholar Jennifer Lynn Stoever has identified "the sonic color line" as an enduring, historically constructed mechanism that prevents white actors from hearing nonwhite voices in their full humanity.[39]

Stoever looks to Du Bois's *Dusk of Dawn* for this sonic metaphor for racialization. Du Bois describes the feeling of being a Black American in a vacuum, trying to be heard when asking for justice and equality, but separated from whites by a glass barrier. The whites do not even recognize the injustice to which those in the vacuum point:

> It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing world stop in curiosity; these gesticulations seem so pointless; they laugh and pass on. They still either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even what they hear, they do not understand.[40]

This barrier, a structured societal divide, shapes both how people can be heard in institutional contexts and the amount of communicative labor it takes for nonwhite voices to exist in white-dominant space. So in the workplace, you are already coded as having a deficit of authority; when you insist upon making the injustices audible to those around you, you are heard as unreasonable.

Attention to the sonic color line demonstrates that white supremacy in the United States is upheld in part through listening practices that mark racial difference through sound. Crucially, this set of listening practices has entrenched in dominant US discourses a "racialized auditory filter," setting sounds associated with white culture as normative.[41]

Recall Arvand from the opening paragraphs of this introduction. He noted of his white colleagues, "we're hearing the same thing and hearing it completely differently." These different evaluations came from a tape recording alone, without a photo pairing. A Middle Eastern American broadcaster raised in a nonwhite, low- to middle-class neighborhood, Arvand came to public radio later in life, only after he had established his own music career. His own subjectivity as an outsider within marks the whiteness of the space, and the white dominance of these evaluative processes around voices considered for public radio airtime.

Public radio's practices are shaped by the sonic color line in ways that challenge the industry's mission to provide a public service over commercial profits. In the public radio production process, the sonic color line manifests

as a systematic racialized evaluation of voices. When voices evaluated for broadcast are coded as nonwhite, their clarity and expertise are more likely to be questioned. I analyze these patterns through the insights of outsiders within historically white spaces, like Arvand, who enter public radio with different practices of evaluative listening. The discrepancy between his hearing and that of his white colleagues is socially conditioned over time, and integral to understanding the reproduction of white supremacy via voice evaluation.

When sourcing stories, editors put extra scrutiny on guests without media training and with accents associated with nonwhite communities. Employees of color broaden the set of voices that make it on air by training guests and conducting bilingual reporting and interpretation work. In the case of producers sourcing live guests, some respondents feel a responsibility to protect the source from the whiteness of the space, acting as a cultural broker throughout the process. Further, as my respondents reflect on their own experiences trying to get sources on air, they propose alternative ways of listening to sources and evaluating whether voices are worthy of airtime.

THE INSIGHTS OF PEOPLE OF COLOR IN WHITE INSTITUTIONAL SPACE

Arvand's and Sarah's experiences show that even as people of color enter white institutional spaces, whiteness serves as a gatekeeping credential; the normative ways of performing in white institutional spaces prevent full belonging for nonwhite employees.[42]

So how does it feel to be a nonwhite worker in a white institutional space? Critical organizational research has found that the normative practices in white racialized organizations mark nonwhite and nonmale bodies as racialized and gendered and therefore deviant as they are measured against the default category of white and male. Tsedale Melaku theorizes the price for Black women professionals of existing in white institutional space as an "inclusion tax," due to the daily racism and misogyny they face in the workplace.[43] At the same time, their disruption opens analytical possibilities to denaturalize the unmarked, often taken-for-granted white dominance and patriarchy in racialized and gendered organizations.[44]

Beyond their very presence as disruption, workers of color gain experiences as they navigate the workplace that lead them to offer valuable insights into the inequalities that permeate the modern workplace. Perceptions of the world are shaped by one's social location in the racial order.[45] As Adia

Wingfield shows through an interview study with Black professionals, racialized emotions such as anger and frustration are coded as more acceptable and appropriate when white in the workplace. The professionals that Wingfield interviews know these feeling rules very well, even if their non-Black colleagues do not.[46] The ways workers of color perform emotional labor in organizations are rendered invisible by colorblind ideologies.[47]

I center how employees of color articulate their own experiences in and responses to their workplaces as what Patricia Hill Collins calls "outsiders within": people in elite spaces who are from marginalized communities or who hold historically marginalized identities.[48] The outsiders within white racialized organizations challenge the organization's moral legitimacy by laying bare who is *not* included in the existing organization, its output, and its audience. Further, they bring a unique standpoint to the social structure in which they are marginalized. Thus, I have found that the racialized self-formation of outsiders within the public radio industry often produces a unique standpoint on understanding the sonic color line in the workplace.

This book offers a study of public radio in the United States that considers those who are marginalized within the industry as vital voices to help us better understand it. I have often been asked why I am asking nonwhite employees to talk to me, when I am considering whiteness as the structuring mechanism that shapes their exclusion. There are two reasons.

The first is that while hostility against nonwhite bodies in white spaces is pervasive, this hostility can remain relatively invisible to the white people moving through the space. Elijah Anderson shows how tenuous white space is for Black individuals, noting:

> A particular organization—for instance, a corporation, a nonprofit, or a public sector bureaucracy—may pride itself on being egalitarian and universalistic and not recognize its own shortcomings with respect to racial inequality. The generalized effect of the iconic ghetto is often subtle; the issue of race can remain unspoken, but in the white space it can count for everything.[49]

Anderson here is addressing the anti-Blackness of white space, but as Wendy Leo Moore points out, nonwhite racial groups face distinct yet interrelated subjugation in institutions structured by whiteness.[50] While outcomes and experiences may differ, they share in subjection to conceptions of what is good, appropriate, and right being set by historically white (and historically racially exclusionary) structures. David Embrick and Wendy Leo Moore note:

> The mechanisms of White institutional space are so deeply constitutive of the infrastructure of U.S. organizations and institutions that they become tacit, implicitly understood without conscious thought, normalizing White superiority and successful attainment of institutional resources and characterizing non-White inferiority as normal in these social spaces.[51]

In other words, white bodies and white authority are naturalized and conceptualized as the universal norm in white space. The pervasive and deeply embedded character of white supremacy allows it to operate without much notice to white employees.

Second, while white employees might have difficulty seeing or hearing these mechanisms of exclusion due to the seamlessness with which they operate in the space, cultural workers of color in white organizations tend to develop what I call a "sonic double consciousness": an awareness of the racialized evaluation of voice in white institutional space.[52] Cultural workers of color form or further develop this awareness when producing and voicing stories, due in part to the interactions with the white world that this labor entails. So while white people remain largely unaware of these dynamics of language and racism, interviewees of color recognize the racial exclusion that occurs in their workplaces daily, whether it happens to them or to their colleagues.

By undertaking qualitative interviews with cultural workers of color in the industry, I *start* with those who were not included at the decision-making table at the organization's inception. That way, the discussion is less about how we get more people to the table than about reconsidering the insights once excluded and the ways these exclusions enshrine racial inequalities. In this way, I offer up this book as a modest corrective to existing public radio historiography—a corrective that is not all-encompassing, but one that offers one starting point for a more inclusive history of the industry, decentering the dominant voices in the archive.

Literal and Metaphorical Voice in the Contemporary Public Radio Industry

To recap, we know from existing research that (1) white institutional space shapes who has authority and resources in a racially exclusionary way; (2) racism shapes voice evaluation in white institutional space; and (3) people of color in white institutional space offer a unique vantage point on these uneven power dynamics.

From these insights, I argue two points. First, white institutional space is a site of reproduction of the sonic color line, or the racialized evaluation of nonwhite voices as nonnormative in mainstream (white) American listening practices. Second, nonnormative bodies in white racialized organizations, due to their increased awareness of the space's whiteness as outsiders within, may develop a linguistic responsibility to other nonnormative speech communities. This sense of responsibility guides their work to get a wider diversity of sources on air.

When I analyze how voices of color are perceived in public radio, I am considering them in both the literal and the metaphorical sense. By "literal voices," I refer to the exclusion of voices that fall outside of legibility for a presumed white, professional-class audience.[53] In other words, analyzing "literal voices" is the analysis of how the industry evaluates accents, cadence, and tone. This exclusion of literal voices is what Arvand refers to at the beginning of this introduction when he notes a mismatch between how he perceives an accent's intelligibility and how his colleagues do.

By "metaphorical voices," I refer to the perspectives and content of voices, including how such voices are framed, narrated, and curated. In other words, what the voices say politically. The cultural studies scholar Nick Couldry speaks to how crucial voice and listening are to human agency:

> All human beings have the capacity for voice, to give an account of their lives. [. . .] This irreducible feature of human agency requires recognition, as a feature of every human agent, and therefore as a feature mutually shared by any two or more humans who interact with each other.[54]

Mutual recognition, then, requires not only the ability of individuals to voice their own opinions in social space. The person voicing their perspective within an organization must be heard and seriously considered on their own terms; otherwise, the power imbalance in the interaction is exacerbated.

When Sarah, introduced in the opening of this introduction, is faced with the question of why white people would care about the stories she pitched, she is being implicitly instructed that she must pitch the story on the terms of the dominant racial group. When this consideration is embedded in the cultural production process, one risks disseminating distorted narratives about minoritized groups already misrecognized in society.

While the question of why white people would care is distinct from the question of whether an accent is intelligible, the two issues are intimately linked. B, a Black woman reporter in the southern United States, noted these efforts at her local station:

> I have also really been trying to push where I can [on] accents. I think often our rural [white-dominated] location is used as a reason to not put on somebody with an accent. [. . .] I did a story about this coffee shop. It's a hub for resettled refugees outside of the city. And I was like, "We need to have someone on [the air] who is a refugee!"

B went on to note why the inclusion of these voices is important for public service:

> People need to get comfortable with accents and understanding accents on the air, 'cause that's just the direction this country's coming in. I think it's a public service, even—if you wanna go that far—to put different accents on the air that people will have to really kind of think about and get used to.

When B insisted on covering an important gathering spot for refugees in her station's coverage area, she considered voice on both the literal and the metaphorical level. On the literal level, she platformed refugee voices despite conventional concerns that their accents as new arrivals would not be easily understood by listeners born in the region. On the metaphorical level, she platformed their perspectives by producing a story that centers those points of view, rather than speaking for them. B's insistence is rooted in a developed practice of listening across difference.

Listening across Difference

Fatima, a Latinx reporter I spoke with, was tired of the limited perspective that emerged when trying to make different voices and accents fit within the typical public radio form. She insisted that reporters must defy this expectation:

> I think I should push back on that, because it's not always to entertain. The goal is to actually empathize or learn or push and ask more questions. Hear from someone that you typically wouldn't hear from. Not just be like, "Oh, yes, wow. They sound really smart. They're a good talker."

Fatima articulates an alternative way of thinking about public media: What if the goal was not to capture the attention of the white professional class, but to expand the soundscape of public media beyond that audience's racialized auditory filter? She and her colleagues feel an obligation to listen that resonates with media theorist Tanja Dreher's concept of "listening across difference."[55]

The concept of "listening across difference" is a powerful one as it shifts the focus from ensuring that everyone has a voice in media, to considering how and whether "diverse voices" get listened to. As noted above, the sonic color line has inhibited recognition across axes of racialized difference because of the way that race has structured our society. Thus, it requires active work to create an institutionalized practice of listening across difference.

Dreher's focus on listening shifts responsibility away from marginalized speakers being made to contort themselves into legibility for the white American listening ear. When applied to this research, it is clear that my respondents actively work to listen across difference. Nicola, a Latinx reporter, described a *learned* ability to hear a wider variety of accents as intelligible as having a "sympathetic ear":

> I have a sympathetic ear because I've also taught English to non-English speakers and I've taught ESL in this country. I love that. The reason I'm bringing up the phrasing of that word is I love that word of having a "sympathetic ear." There's the linguistic part of that. Let's actually listen to people and what they're saying and what they're trying to say and come back to them—"Is this what you mean? Did I understand you correctly?"

Nicola proudly explains that she has developed this sympathetic ear over time, through concerted efforts and training to do so:

> And that's something that I learned from teaching a language, and I had some really good teachers in journalism school, of really talking to people and listening to comprehend so that you're having the best possible interviews at the end of when you write something out. That's to say, I wanted to speak to people with different accents.

She insists that this type of learning can be embedded into institutional training:

> We've got to train all of our reporters to listen to our sources and be less worried about accents. If your problem is the accent, if your problem is the language, then just give the translation. Give the summation. I feel very strong feelings about that.

The ethics of listening across difference that these public radio employees of color bring to their interactions with sources gives us a glimpse of what a more capacious, and antiracist, auditory filter might sound like.

By offering an account of both obstacles to and strategies of resistance, this book shows the challenges that lie ahead while keeping in mind the potential embedded in the day-to-day strategies of employees of color to dismantle the sonic color line. Once we apprehend the mechanisms that reproduce a racialized set of listening practices, might we be able to build a more ethical framework for listening across difference in the American public sphere?

A NOTE ON ANONYMIZATION

While the eighty-three employees of color I spoke to for this project range from temporary contract workers to prominent, well-established employees, I have anonymized every interviewee for the purposes of telling the story of public radio through their perspectives. Any journalist or public figure named in the text has spoken on these issues in other outlets or on social media, and I cite them accordingly.

As Sara Ahmed offers in her book *Complaint!*, complaints are often (mis)heard as obstacles to progress, as stickiness that leaves people in negativity. I join her reframing of complaint as a practice that enables people in institutions to "show what you know."[56] Indeed, Garcia-Navarro's and Cornish's tweets about their need to contend with the presumption of whiteness in their organization revealed to me a deep well of knowledge, one that only further deepened as I began to speak with interviewees lower in the workplace hierarchy. Yet many of the workers of color I interviewed are facing conditions of workplace precarity. Some live on permatemp status; others worry about their status as the "only one," putting them in the position of constantly speaking out and taking professional risks. Thus, their anonymity is key as they continue in such workplace struggles.

I heartily believe that this collection of voices can be a tool for organizing for people of color in public radio and in the audio industry more broadly. I feel that this can be better achieved when considering these experiences as part of an industry-wide phenomenon—something that might be obscured by naming individuals.

When I presented preliminary findings to a group of radio and podcast producers at one of their professional conferences, I opened space during the discussion for audio workers of color to voice their own concerns. While they discussed being "the only one" at their respective stations and organizations, they also indicated that these findings offered a point of

legitimation—hearing others' similar accounts showed that they weren't alone in the ways they experienced storytelling in their organization.

I give an overview here of the experiences of a wide range of public radio employees of color; their commonality is their self-identification as people of color. Beyond that, they do experience other distinct systems of oppression differently: women, nonbinary people, and femmes are subject to patriarchal constraints; working-class people of color must contend with structural elitism; Black people experience not only white supremacy but also the structural anti-Blackness that both white people and non-Black people of color can benefit from.[57] I draw these distinctions out through examples, but the throughline of the book centers the role of whiteness in shaping the experiences of all my participants. This move is meant to center points of possible solidarity across racialized workers.

While I do my best to reflect a wide range of experiences, I know that the accounts featured in the book are only partial; not all employees of color in public radio will see themselves reflected in this patchwork. But I do hope there are points of resonance with readers who have experience in the industry; or, if not, then generative points of dissonance!

This book is meant to serve as another reminder for workers of color in the industry, particularly those in "the only one" position, that they are not, in fact, alone. Their complaints are manifestations of the deep institutional knowledge they possess from their position as racialized subjects. May my research serve as a point of solidarity and a driver for change.

The Story Arc

The book consists of six empirical chapters.

In chapters 1 through 3, I examine the roots of the public radio industry. National Public Radio formed under the Corporation for Public Broadcasting as a white racialized organization because it drew on practices from the existing, white-dominant nonprofit radio field. It became a network that championed voices of white women and challenged the authorial masculine voice. And it became a network that sought out donations from the white professional class, given its perpetual struggles with underfunding. Each of these practices has contributed to the formation of the "voice of public radio" as it stands today, in its progressive elements, in its positive impacts, and in its imperfection.

In chapters 4 through 6, I analyze the contemporary industry practices that maintain public radio's signature sonic aesthetic, with a focus on the

constraints that employees of color face in trying to break away from the network's traditional narrative framing and sound. These constraints faced by producers, editors, and journalists of color can lead to distortions in the stories available in the public sphere; at the same time, they give rise to robust forms of resistance among people of color and other storytellers with a racial consciousness.

I conclude by turning to the broader relationships between racism, voice, and the public sphere—and what all this means for the future of public media. I highlight three main ways we might challenge the trenchant sonic color line within this industry: namely, reassessing public media's sense of moral certitude, changing public radio's funding structure, and shifting production practices according to the insights of employees of color. I end by discussing how the implications of this research can move beyond the cultural industries, showing that linguistic discrimination maintained through institutional logics can be embedded in seemingly nonracial processes in consequential social organizations, from health-care settings to schools to realty offices.

Whether it be in a newsroom, a school, or any other institution, the same ethical responsibility to listen across difference remains. Because until we dismantle the sonic color line everywhere, we're never going to hear the whole story.

INDEX

Page numbers followed by f indicate a figure