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## Review of the book *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* by T. J. Sugrue

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Review of the book *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* by  
T.J. Sugrue

**Keywords**

African American, Barack Obama, Race relations, black person leader, President

**Disciplines**

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helpful suggestions for ways to raise awareness of one's gender and heterosexual bias. Additional discussions suggest ways to combat sexism and homophobia in interpersonal relationships, places of employment, and social institutions.

The book's final section, "Microaggressions in Employment, Education, and Mental Health Practice," is composed of three chapters (10–12) that address contextual processes in work, academic, and therapeutic settings. Sue observes that such settings influence the manifestation of microaggressions. Several highlights are noteworthy in this section. Sue presents the psychological implications of microaggressions within the workplace on employee spirit, reputation, and personal integrity (214–16). A second highlight is Sue's informative discussion of how certain philosophical approaches for handling diversity within organizations (e.g., a color-blind focus on inclusion and ignoring differences) systematically endorse microaggressions toward cultural minorities (216). A third highlight is the presentation of strategies to help educators become aware of their own bias and discussion of ways to facilitate critical dialogues about microaggression and oppression in classrooms (250–54). A final highlight of this section is the context-specific examples of racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions in therapeutic practice (262–66, table 12.1).

Sue convincingly argues that subtle forms of -isms exist and that these forms of microaggressions have a profound, negative effect on the daily lives of persons of color, women, and the LGBT community. This text takes a giant first step in helping readers, particularly white male readers, to increase awareness of their own implicit biases and unconscious use of microaggressions. This text also offers practical advice on ways to apply one's awareness of modern -isms and personal biases to improved efforts to empower (rather than to oppress) cultural minorities in numerous social settings.

The abundant examples of subtle and overt -isms provoked me, as a mixed-race female, to reflect on personal encounters in which my own identity has been the target of a microassault, microinsult, or microinvalidation. Although I found the process of relating to and reflecting on content to be emotionally arduous at times, overall this text appreciably reaffirmed and validated my own experiences as a cultural minority in academia.

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**Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race.** By Thomas J. Sugrue. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. 178. \$24.95 (cloth).

It is easy to sink into hyperbole when discussing America's forty-fourth president. I am certainly susceptible. After all, a black person is now leader of what used to be called the Free World. Such a seemingly improbable state of affairs almost demands a certain degree of histrionics. It calls for recognition of this political moment as breathtakingly unprecedented.

Indeed, it is difficult—if not impossible—to overstate the exceptional nature of the current political landscape. People who write about Barack Obama and what he portends or represents tend to paint his colorful portrait in decidedly majestic and biblical strokes, would-be Joshuas pitted against the generation of Moses. The entire thing is cast in wildly mythological terms.

And the pundits play on such powerful mythmaking, even more than is usual in this hyperpartisan game of American politics. They express intense skepticisms

and profound paranoia, dressing up critiques in an embroidered language of clear absolutes and fantastical extremes. He's a socialist! He's a communist! He's anti-American! Heck, he wasn't even born in the United States! He supports death panels and concentration camps run by FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency)! He may even be the anti-Christ! All are characters in a cosmic epic of black-hatted villains and silver-badged heroes, of angels and demons; Obama plays savior or Satan, depending on the storyteller.

It is within this context of heightened dramaturgy and exaggerated anxieties that Obama's election can spark a so-called run on guns in anticipation of potential changes to national policy around the right to bear arms. But there is also a racial angle to such fear, especially when economic insecurities cry out for easy scapegoats and fears increasingly pivot on arguably reactionary racial politicking. With a double-digit unemployment rate and a record-setting national debt, the stories told about President Obama seem both to absorb and reflect a collective angst about America's current multiracial realities. But historian Thomas Sugrue's very measured and careful new book does a masterful job of steering clear of such catheted and overblown rhetoric, deftly guiding the reader near the heat of racial politics without distracting him or her with the mere brightness of its blinding light.

*Not Even Past* proffers a fine-grained argument about the kind of politics that Obama instantiates, especially with respect to his evolving take on issues of race, class, and difference in American society. Sugrue doesn't talk cable-TV or FEMA conspiracies. There is no overemphasis on Jeremiah Wright, or Bill Ayres, or beer summits on the White House lawn. Though mentioned (sometimes almost in passing), they don't get pride of place. Instead, Sugrue wants to highlight something besides the amped-up spectacularity of such media events.

He starts his story with Obama's earliest views on race and integration, linking the politician's biography (and interpretation of national history) with Obama's intellectual reflections on the state of American life and culture. One of Sugrue's points seems to be that Obama makes very thoughtful and productive use of America's sordid racial past, intent on learning from that past to service aspirations for a harmonious multiracial future. But Sugrue is keen on demonstrating the subtle and not-so-subtle evolution of Obama's basic philosophical and political perspectives, from early critiques of Clinton's rightward turn (e.g., of Clinton's 1996 signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act [110 Stat. 2105]) to Obama's later claims about culture and poverty, claims that hover close to the very Clintonian model he previously critiqued. This was not so much a contradiction (or a simple capitulation to the right), Sugrue seems to argue, as it was an extension of Obama's earliest attempts to play referee and mediator between camps, ideological camps as well as racial ones.

When Harvard's black law students (circa 1990) raged against the school's unwillingness to hire Regina Austin (or any other black female professor) and the school's celebrated African American faculty member, Derrick Bell, resigned his post in solidarity with their cause, Obama, a second-year law student, was intent on trying to "reconcile Harvard's bitter differences by bringing a tone of civility to the debate" (39), writes Sugrue. It was a civility in service to practical compromises and the search for common ground. In *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), Mary Pattillo discusses "black middlemen" (114). These are cross-racial power brokers who, as Sugrue puts it, combine "a politics of respectability with engagement in local and national politics to improve the position of the black poor" (86) and to resolve long-standing political stalemates. Obama was always, Sugrue contends, a version of these middlemen.

If Clinton is one foil for Obama's negotiation of the links between racial and electoral politics, sociologist William Julius Wilson is another. Sugrue emphasizes Obama's mobilization of Wilson's call for a kind of racial "hidden agenda" (83) that would be palatable to whites (for its raceless and class-based rhetoric) while "disproportionately benefit[ing] minorities because of these groups' overrepresentation among the working-class and poor" (84). In my most recent book, *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* (New York: Basic, 2008), I try to describe the kinds of race-based skepticisms that inform African American political participation, and I argue that such cloaked policy interventions might just be the epitome of mainstream political cynicism vis-à-vis race. These interventions, I suggest, are potentially more disturbing than any of the race-based conspiracy theories found in contemporary urban America. Sugrue, however, might characterize Obama as less a cynic than a syncretic amalgamator, someone hell-bent on reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable, an alchemist of the racially impossible. (Wilson has recently reconsidered his investment in this hidden agenda.)

Sugrue's argument ends with an examination of the 2008 race speech that Obama delivered in Philadelphia. The speech was the then-nominee's response to a media brouhaha spawned by controversies surrounding the sermons of his Chicago-based pastor, Jeremiah Wright. For Sugrue, the speech explicitly thematized and distilled Obama's overall approach to America's complicated racial history, demonstrating the candidate's call for a metaphysics of hybridity, for an understanding of Obama himself (and his conciliatory politics) as the future (if not the present) for all Americans.

One irony of the Obama presidency stems precisely from how it functions vis-à-vis discussions of race and racism. As a black president, Obama is effectively forbidden from voicing any direct and unsolicited invocation of race or racism. He cannot be seen to rely on race as a social analytic (at least, not beyond the conciliatory moves he made in that aforementioned race speech), because such a turn would compromise his already tenuous status as postracial everyman. At the same time, Obama's election has galvanized an emboldened form of white American citizenship, not necessarily a Ku Klux Klan version fueled by unabashed racial animus but a version marked by recognition of what the so-called browning of America means for the formerly privileged status that whiteness conferred. With Obama's electoral victory, what Shelby Steele labels "white guilt" metastasizes into something close to white rage (*White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* [New York: Harper Collins, 2006], 21). And in some ways, that is part of what Sugrue demonstrates about the shifting and malleable burdens of race; he illuminates a notion of race that many white Americans increasingly consider to be their own new burden to bear (as America's aforementioned browning is coupled with increasingly fierce minoritarian calls for substantive political and economic inclusion and equality). Obama has always fancied himself just the right person to allay such fears and to forge spaces of commonality in a balkanized present haunted by a racial past. As Sugrue compellingly maintains, however, that past is not nearly so "past" at all.

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