



Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama

By Tim Wise

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Race is, and always has been, an explosive issue in the United States. In this timely new book, Tim Wise explores how Barack Obama's emergence as a political force is taking the race debate to new levels. According to Wise, for many white people, Obama's rise signifies the end of racism as a pervasive social force; they point to Obama not only as a validation of the American ideology that anyone can make it if they work hard, but also as an example of how institutional barriers against people of color have all but vanished. But is this true? And does a reinforced white belief in color-blind meritocracy potentially make it harder to address ongoing institutional racism? After all, in housing, employment, the justice system, and education, the evidence is clear: white privilege and discrimination against people of color are still operative and actively thwarting opportunities, despite the success of individuals like Obama.

Is black success making it harder for whites to see the problem of racism, thereby further straining race relations, or will it challenge anti-black stereotypes to such an extent that racism will diminish and race relations improve? Will blacks in power continue to be seen as an "exception" in white eyes? Is Obama "acceptable" because he seems "different from most blacks," who are still viewed too often as the dangerous and inferior "other"?

"From the Civil Rights struggle, to Dr. King's dream, to Barack Obama's election, Tim Wise provides us with an extremely important and timely analysis of the increasing complexity of race on the American political and social landscape. *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama* provides an insightful and much needed lens through which we can begin to navigate this current stage in our ongoing quest for a more inclusive definition of who we are as a nation. It's definitely a book for these times!"—Danny Glover

"Tim Wise has looked behind the curtain. In *Between Barack and a Hard Place* he explores the real issues of race in the Obama campaign and incoming presidency, issues that the mainstream media has chosen to ignore. His book

debunks any notion that the United States has entered a post-racial period; instead he identifies the problems that emerge in the context of the victory of a black presidential candidate who chose to run an essentially non-racial campaign. With this book, Wise hits the bull's eye."—Bill Fletcher

"Wise outlines...how racism and white privilege have morphed to fit the modern social landscape. In prose that reads like his lightening rod speeches, he draws from a long list of high-profile campaign examples to define what he calls 'Racism 2.0,' a more insidious form of racism that actually allows for and celebrates the achievements of individual people of color because they're seen as the exceptions, not the rules."—Jamilah King, *Colorlines*

"This book makes an intriguing argument and is packed with insight. Wise clearly explains the complexity of institutional racism in contemporary society. He continuously reminds the reader that Obama's victory *may* signal the entrenchment of a more complicated, subtle, and insidious form of racism. The jury is still out."—Jeff Torlina, *Multicultural Review*

Tim Wise is among the most prominent antiracist writers and activists in the US and has appeared on ABC's *20/20* and MSNBC Live. His previous books include *Speaking Treason Fluently* and *White Like Me*.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Wise, a white anti-racism activist and scholar (and author of *White Like Me*), pushes plenty of buttons in this methodical breakdown of racism's place in the wake of Barack Obama's victory. In the first of two essays, the author obliterates the canard of the US as a post-racial society; bigotry and insitutionalized discrimination, he contends, have simply morphed into "Racism 2.0," in which successful minorities are celebrated "as having 'transcended' their blackness in some way." While racial disparities in employment and income, housing, education and other areas persist, Obama has become an amiable sitcom dad like Bill Cosby, putting whites at ease by speaking, looking and acting "a certain way"—not to mention avoiding discussion of race. In his second, more incendiary essay, Wise concludes that whites must take responsibility for racism. What the majority of whites fail to grasp, he says, is that they continue to benefit from a system of "entrenched privileges" centuries in the making, and that racism remains a serious obstacle for millions of African Americans. There's no sugar coating here for whites, nor are there any news flashes for Americans of color, but Wise bravely enumerates the unpalatable truths of a nation still struggling to understand its legacy of racist oppression.

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Review

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"Wise fully delivers (by merging scholarship with politically engaged criticism in a short and accessibly written manner)...this book is forceful, relentless, and convincing."—*Journal of Higher Education*

"From income and jobs, housing, education, criminal justice, and healthcare, Wise masterfully demonstrates the continuing disparities between black and white America. He notes the absence of these issues in the Obama-Biden campaign or the attempt to read structural inequalities through a race-free lens called CLASS. At every step, Wise absolves the Obama campaign of responsibility for their less than candid approach to racial issues, saying that campaign strategists confronted the reality of white racism by side-stepping the issue...Wise's book provides welcome relief to the obnoxious self-congratulation that followed Obama's election to the presidency."—Jillian McLaughlin, *Kosmopolitan*

"The punning title of his book, '*Between Barack and a Hard Place*,' belies the sobering material within. Wise paints a stark picture of racial inequality in the United States today...Wise's short book reads like an old-school polemic: Thomas Paine's 'Common Sense' for the 21st century...A post-racial United States is an imagined country."—Adam Bradley, *The Washington Post*

"Tim Wise, a long-time anti-racist activist, has just finished a very timely book that warns against becoming comfortable with racism while we are distracted by Obama's election. *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama* continues the excellent work around the issue of [w]hite [p]rivilege that Wise has pounded home in his books, articles, and public talks across the country."—Jeff Smith, *Media Mouse*

Review

"His writing and thinking constitute a bulwark of common sense, and uncommon wisdom, on the subject of race, politics and culture. He is a national treasure."

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