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Review – Tim Wise, *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and Denial in the Age of Obama*

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BOOK REVIEWS

BETWEEN BARACK AND A HARD PLACE: RACISM AND WHITE DENIAL IN THE AGE OF OBAMA by *Tim Wise*. Pp. 160. City Lights Publishers, San Francisco, California, 2009. \$13.95. ISBN: 978-0872865006 (paper).

Tim Wise, writer, lecturer, economist, political analyst, and anti-racist popular speaker has written three major books on race in America or to put it more succinctly how white Americans consider themselves superior to people who are blacks, native Americans, Latinos, Asians, and non-whites of European descent. As whites they take for granted that they will win and that they will succeed. Wise concurs that the election of Obama is of the greatest importance, but this does not mean that racism is now over. He has put it this way: “Is white America really ready for a black president?” Tim Wise answers in his book that it is not.

For Wise there are two forms of racism which have resulted from this election. First, according to Wise, there is the old-fashioned bigotry or simple racism. Wise calls it Racism 1.0. Blacks and browns (to use his terms), are well acquainted in our society. Call it systemic racial discrimination, traditional forms of segregation, vivid memoria of lynching, race rioting, and maintenance of well-

known areas, privately developed, and closed to blacks. This type of racism rejected Obama from the very beginning and still lurks in the hearts and minds of many whites.

On the other hand, Obama won because there were enough whites from whom there had emerged a certain “enlightened exceptionalism,” which he calls Racism 2.0. These considered Obama as “having ‘transcended’ [his] blackness in some way.” It is this form of racism that is now alive and well in the United States. Wise lists the many social institutions that have broken down among blacks and people of color: education, housing, the criminal justice system. Once again, this is the broken down areas in Racism 1.0. An example was the situation of blacks and non-whites during the flooding in New Orleans during *Katrina*. Consider not only looting and the plight of the aged and the frail, neglected and abandoned, but also the groups of blacks who were barred by white inhabitants from crossing a bridge into an adjacent section of the city. They were armed with weapons. “At least eleven men, all black, were shot by whites in the days following the flooding...” (p. 70)

Wise’s conclusion is that Obama was able to win the approval of many educated whites who were able to “transcend” incidents in racism, because Obama seemed to go beyond “black issues.” And many whites were able to support him. A recent incident of “profiling” of Henry Gates in Cambridge by a policeman did momentarily raise the president’s ire.

Tim Wise comes to the conclusion that whites must take responsibility for the transformation of racism and privilege to justice and equality. Perhaps one may add that, despite everything, we who are blacks have the responsibility for sharing with Obama a new and different vision. As he said in his inauguration address: "...we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve..."

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