

Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness. By John L. Jackson, Jr. New York: Basic Civitas Press, 2008. 257 pp.

Paranoia, a peculiar mental health condition, deals with the particularly intense fear of something or someone. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, paranoia derives from ancient Greek and denotes the “tendency on the part of an individual or group toward excessive or irrational suspiciousness and distrustfulness of others.”¹ In his book *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness*, John L. Jackson, Jr., presents the notion of race as a type of paranoia and compels us to scrutinize America’s views on race.

Within the preface and continuing to chapter one of his book, Jackson embarks on the slapstick comedy of the “Dave Chappelle’s Show,” which first appeared on Comedy Central in January 2003. Jackson examines a skit that Chappelle performed in blackface makeup, which he compares to Al Jolson’s 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* (x-xi). According to Jackson’s reframing of Stephen L. Carter’s book, *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*, “Racial Paranoia is about the post-civil rights of *affirmative action babies* brought up experiencing legal segregation as little more than black-and-white images from a PBS special, or as family stories passed down through the generations” (9). Jackson asserts that race manifested as paranoia is something “so hard for all segments of America to shake” (9). *Racial Paranoia* provides an in-depth look at how “African Americans in the twenty-first century attempt to see something that can’t always be seen, to touch something that may not be there, and to make sense of a small voice inside their heads that whispers and whispers and whispers” (9).

One of the major strengths of this book is the author’s ability to look at the issue of racism from many different perspectives—from Dave Chappelle’s comical performance in *The Player Hater’s Ball*, to the birth of political correctness, which Jackson considers the White man’s newest burden, and within different genres of text and media.

In chapter two, Jackson offers a loose historiography of the construction of race within the American context. By analyzing the construction of race, he provides readers a brief introduction to how this particular phenomenon, biologically based, was formed. He explores the history of Christianity as it pertains to the African-American experience. Jackson states that religion is “one of the many validations for slavery in the United States after the American Revolution” and offers a glimpse into the psychological effects that the construction of race through religion had on the state of mind of both Blacks and Whites during slavery and after the “Nadir” (53-54). He continues, asserting that the process of “bringing God’s Holy Word to the world’s unenlightened savages helped Europeans to defend their pith-helmeted excursions into the Dark Continent and provide them with a more positive psychological upside to the brutal realities of chattel slavery” (54).

Though racism has become less viable, some argue that due to its subtlety racism has become even more hazardous to the well being of everyone in America. Jackson contends that “we are being naïve if we think that we can sit down and intellectualize ourselves out of its sticky clutches, if we imagine that ending explicit commitment to blatant types of racial discrimination must mean that we are done with racism’s awful legacy for good” (85).

Chapter three captures the discourse on the subtlety of racism by classifying it as *de cardio* racism. Jackson briefly traces the history of old paradigms of race relations that dealt with the *de jure* and *de facto* movements of racism. *De jure* and *de facto* racism, which he considers

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>

“traditional forms of racism,” are not as pervasive as they were during the decades before the Civil Rights Movement. Jackson asserts that in “decades following the civil rights movement, a new paradigm of race relations [arose] from the smoldering of *de jure* and *de facto* racism” (86). This new paradigm of racism, which he brands *de cardio*, is a type of “racism banned from the public sphere and reimaged as snug within the inaccessible hearts of other people, [requiring] new methods of analytical engagement” (86). *De cardio* racism, according to Jackson,

...is about what the law can't touch, what won't be easily proved or disproved, what can't be simply criminalized and deemed unconstitutional. It is racism that is most terrifying because it is hidden, secret, papered over with public niceties and politically correct jargon. It is a very powerful way that many Americans think about race today, as a subtle by-product of the ineluctably human fact that people feel things they'll never admit (86).

Jackson also provides a catalog of how *de cardio* racism moves in a multicultural society by describing how fluidly it functions while simultaneously hiding beneath personal beliefs and the notion of political correctness.

1. *De cardio* racism assumes that if one hopes to ascertain another's personal beliefs or motivations *vis-à-vis* race, a mechanism is needed that would allow one to see past what another says, or even do, in his heart (87).
2. *De cardio* racism is circumscribed by the very impossibility of legislating private sentiments and personal morality. Rather than just confronting tangible foes, today's would-be champions of racial equality often find themselves opposed by all the right rhetoric about racial equality if not just by palpable silence (88).
3. *De cardio* racism asks where all of yesterday's racial wolves went, and why the sheep seem to be standing around licking their chops (89).
4. In an era of *de cardio* racism, naïve versions of political correctness can make a bad racial situation even worse (90).

According to Jackson, it is important to look at the inherent nature of racial paranoia from a psychological or sociological perspective in this new American dilemma. He also emphasizes that political correctness along with the demonization of public racism “has proven tragically effective at hiding racism, not just healing it” (91).

In chapter four, “Racial Paranoia's Canonical Texts,” Jackson analyzes the 1960's novel *The Man Who Cried I Am*, written by John A. Williams. Here, Jackson parses the fictional plot set within Williams's novel, which describes in detail the U.S. government's plan of detaining and destroying all American citizens of African descent: the “King Alfred Plan”(111). The plan, which played upon the country's suspicions and paranoia, can be traced back to Orson Welles's infamous 1939 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, “during which Welles fooled at least some listeners into believing that Martians had actually begun attacking Earth by way of New Jersey” (114). He asserts that “*The Man Who Cried I Am* is an honorary member of an unofficial canon of books most commonly used to ground racial conspiracy theories within the African American community”(114).

Also on Jackson's list of the unofficial canon of books most commonly used for such racial-conspiracy theories are *The Isis Paper: The Keys to the Colors* by Frances Cress Welsing.

Jackson claims that Welsing's arguments rest on one foundational premise: White people are the ultimate paranoiacs because they fear "genetic annihilation" (120). Dr. Welsing's book, like the "King Alfred" conspiracy, fixates on Whites' subconscious fear of Blacks. Other books he includes in the unofficial canon are *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* by Marimba Ani, which Jackson describes as "a massive tome that links history, religion, psychology, anthropology, and linguistics into a grand theory about whites and their collective self-assessments" (125), Chiekh Anta Diop's *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, and Chancellor Williams's *The Destruction of Black Civilization*.

In chapter five Jackson takes a personal journey through the world of hip-hop, in which he was raised as a youth in Brooklyn, New York. He provides an in-depth look into the hip-hop culture of the 1970s and 1980s and its connection to the Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam. He correlates the philosophy of the Five Percent Nation and the Nation of Islam to hip-hop and states that the latter "usually gets designated as 'conscious rap,' a subgenre made up of songs specifically designed to endorse pro-Black ideas (in the Distinctive traditions of Afrocentrism, Pan-Africanism, and Black Nationalism)" (140-42). The conscious side of hip-hop, lyrically speaking, seems to follow the line of conspiracy theories and theorists. He claims that "hip-hoppers also highlight the *de cardio* subtleties of perceived racism, of something qualitatively different from racism of old" (159). Jackson gives an example of how hip-hop is linked to *de jure*, *de facto*, and *de cardio* structures of racism, referencing the famous "political incorrectness" of Kanye West's claim that former President George W. Bush displayed an obvious "lack of care for black people" in the wake of the Katrina hurricane (161).

In chapter six Jackson begins with a conversation he had with a "thirty-something" New Yorker from Harlem a couple of days after the traumatic event of 9/11 (165). He examines how the media continues to play a huge part in the fluctuation of racial paranoia, which manifests itself within the cracks of *de cardio* racism. He also makes reference to different events that received extensive media focus, such as the O. J. Simpson trial or the Duke University case that dealt with the rape of an African- American woman. Jackson provides a timeline of events that illustrates how the media manipulates racism while also hiding the *de jure* and *de facto* ways that race and racism appear historically.

In conclusion, *Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* is an excellent source for comprehending the role that race plays in the minds of many African Americans. This book should be required reading for all those who study race relations, whether historically or contemporarily. It offers another side to understanding W. E. B. Du Bois's statement that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." This book also shows how racism, in America specifically, has become a shadowing act for many African Americans. A major strength of this book is the author's compilation of an extraordinary amount of information, which is comprehensive and relevant for today's post-civil-rights era. It has indeed become the White man's newest burden.

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