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Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race. By Thomas J. Sugrue. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010. 165 pp.

Jeffrey D. Howison

Thomas Sugrue has a habit of complicating the dominant historiographical interpretations and explanations of racial history in the United States. For those familiar with his previous works on post-WWII Detroit and the northern civil rights struggle, it should come as no surprise that his latest book, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race*, demonstrates some of the reasons why he is widely considered to be among the most innovative American historians and one of the country's most authoritative scholars of race relations. Conversely, those expecting a linear story that begins with Rosa Parks and ends with Obama's inaugural ceremony will have their assumptions upended by this powerful but succinct volume. This is not a book about the civil rights movement, nor is an Obama biography—although it conveys much useful information about these subjects. Instead, Sugrue places Obama's rise in the context of the major debates that have occurred at the intersections of race, class, and politics in more recent decades, particularly the 1980s and 90s. By dislodging Obama from a linear narrative of civil rights history and progress, Sugrue successfully avoids the "change versus continuity" framework of American racial history, and in so doing, he brilliantly summarizes the most important themes and theses of the American post-civil rights era.

The book is composed of three related though distinct essays, which were initially delivered as a series of lectures at Princeton University (somewhat reminiscent of how C. Vann Woodward's lectures about the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision became the foundation for his classic, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*). In the first essay, "'This is My Story': Obama, Civil Rights, and Memory," Sugrue provides a biographical sketch of Obama with an emphasis on his childhood in Hawaii, which in 1961, as it remains today, was the only American state that did not have

a white racial majority. Sugrue argues that these early experiences had a deep impact on the future President, as a young Obama "found himself grappling with the racial categories that America had exported to its island possession" (17).

As Obama became increasingly involved in politics, initially in New York but ultimately in Chicago, where he first arrived in 1985, he became increasingly aware that racial coalitions played a much larger role in securing and maintaining political power than a simple and outdated "race politics." As Sugrue shows, Obama's political strategies and heritage would be shaped much more by the urban machines of Harold Washington, the shrewd deal-making of David Axelrod, and Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" than by the ideas of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X. By the early 1990s, as Obama began to emerge in Chicago politics, he had successfully "distanced himself from . . . the polarizing politics of civil rights" (35), toward a vision—and more importantly, a public *image*, that attempted to transcend racial categories and the black freedom struggle. In the process, Obama successfully crafted a unique perception of himself and solidified King's legacy in mainstream American consciousness, not as a critic of US foreign policy or social inequality, but as a "soft-spoken prophet of fairness, hope, opportunity, and an ill-defined change" (52). The striking parallels between Obama's depoliticized portrayal of King with his own tenure as President and subsequent failure to deliver on his promised campaign rhetoric of "change" remains implicit, although the point does not require more than a casual reading between the lines in order to be made.

The second essay, "Obama and the Truly Disadvantaged: The Politics of Race and Class," focuses upon the evolution of Obama's thinking as it was situated in related sets of debates taking place among intellectuals and within the black community that had to do with the causes and consequences of racialized urban poverty. These debates were related to the sociologist William Julius Wilson's influential writings on the "underclass," and nowhere were they more relevant than in Chicago, where Obama was cutting his teeth as a political organizer with one foot in the South Side ghettoes and the other in the world of the bourgeois "Buppies" (black yuppies). Much in the same way as Wilson's arguments—particularly *The Truly Disadvantaged*, which appeared in 1987—appealed to both conservatives and liberals depending upon how its central arguments

were interpreted, Obama also refined his own thinking on the urban poor in ways that borrowed as much from the "Reagan Democrats" as from less sensationalized traditions within the black church. As Sugrue argues, Obama's positions represented an "unlikely bridge between . . . deep currents in American political and intellectual life . . . [that] allowed him to fashion a political appeal, at once, to left, center, and right" (91). And in so doing, he became a blank canvas upon which the American people could project their own ideas about race, class, and social inequality.

The third essay, "'A More Perfect Union'? The Burden of Race in Obama's America" is composed of three subsections. The first is a statistical snapshot of various forms of racial inequality in the contemporary United States. Those who operate under the assumption that such a thing no longer exists will encounter a sobering array of measurements for whites and blacks (and also Hispanics and Asians) concerning health, wealth, housing, and education. The second section offers a useful typology and critique of the various forms of "color-blind ideology," which has been an important if somewhat clumsy analytical tool in recent historiographical interpretations of the "conservative turn" in the post-World War II United States. The final section of the chapter, and the book, is perhaps the least compelling of the volume, and the text ends on a somewhat clichéd (or perhaps naïve) appeal to rally the President toward a path of greater social equality for all American citizens.

In addition to the final passages of the book, there are other weaknesses. First, the text would certainly benefit from an index. Although it is a relatively short work, it is full of information—names, ideas, and events, which could easily be indexed for the convenience of the reader. However, the lengthy Notes nearly compensates for this deficiency. Also, certain portions of the book beg for elaboration. One of the most striking questions remains why (and to a lesser extent, how) Obama entered politics. Indeed, much of the President's early adult life is rather unremarkable. Additionally, Sugrue offers no explanation as to why Obama, after losing miserably to the former Black Panther Bobby Rush in his 2000 bid for the House of Representatives, audaciously ran for an even higher office four years later. Readers interested in a deeper understanding of these issues would benefit from David Remnick's *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, or perhaps from the forthcoming Obama biography by the renowned civil rights historian David Garrow.

In sum, this is an exceptional book that places Obama within a larger sketch of US racial history in the post-civil rights era. By shining a powerful light upon understudied ideas, people, and events of the more recent past, Sugrue implicitly encourages other historians and social scientists to follow his lead. And in so doing, he has once again opened up questions, issues, and ideas for the next generation of scholarship that goes beyond conventional explanations.