

**Racism in American Public Life: A Call to Action** by Johnnetta Betsch Cole.,  
University of Virginia Press, 2021. 152 pp. \$19.95

Two pandemics. Many potential outcomes. How do we navigate racism during two deadly public health crises? What role can Americans play in either perpetuating the harmful effects of racism or supporting the construction of equitable public policies? Dr. Johnnetta Cole considers these two questions in her thoughtful and reflective book, *Racism in American Public Life: A Call to Action*. This book, drawn from her series of Malcolm Lester Lectures, offers three chapters of analysis on the origins, mythologies, and consequences of racism in society.

Cole first offers a personal connection to the history of racism. Growing up in Jacksonville, Florida, the author experienced segregation, isolation, and systemic discrimination. For example, she writes, “When White children received new schoolbooks, my school for ‘colored children’ was given their old ones. The textbooks were filled with the stories of White people who were called heroes and heroines...” (p. 19). Despite those experiences, she excelled in school and became a well-known anthropologist and higher education administrator. In her work, she challenges the very foundations of racist America, including the idea of race-based superiority linked to pseudoscientific studies and socially constructed dominant narratives that preserve racial hierarchies.

Next, Cole urges us to have long overdue and courageous conversations about racism, especially in educational institutions. She concedes it is difficult because those conversations require us to deal with the lasting impact of slavery, move past the fear of

losing rights and privileges, and commit to long-term solutions. While the challenges are certain, so is the potential for social change. Talking about racial trauma, pain, feelings of guilt, and historic and present inequality can be cathartic and even move us to effective solutions. Cole uses the example of conservative writer David Brooks' support for reparations. Brooks was adamantly against reparations until he read Ta-Nehisi Coates's acclaimed essay on reparations in the *Atlantic*. She closes the second chapter with some advice for how to engage in productive conversations about race and racism.

Finally, the author issues an explicit call to action for academic institutions to be at the forefront of movements for social justice. Noting that universities are small representations of broader society, she emphasizes that higher education itself has undergone significant change because engaged people demanded it. From an elite, mostly white and privileged male institution emerged a more equitable and diverse system of public education focused on the common good. Cole provides a long list of Black intellectuals who have changed the course of history through education. While I am not convinced the revolution will come from the ivory tower, I do agree that education can play an important role in helping us to think more critically about race.

Dr. Cole presents a relatable and almost comforting discussion of racism in America, concluding there is still hope for us to travel the path to greater equity and justice. Her stories are compelling, and she clearly believes in the transformative power of education.

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