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Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity

John L. Jackson Jr.

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New York's urban neighborhoods are full of young would-be emcees who aspire to "keep it real" and restaurants like Sylvia's famous soul food eatery that offer a taste of "authentic" black culture. In these and other venues, authenticity is considered the best way to distinguish the real from the phony, the genuine from the fake. But in *Real Black,* John L. Jackson Jr. proposes a new model for thinking about these issues—*racial sincerity.*

Jackson argues that authenticity caricatures identity as something imposed on people, imprisoning them within stereotypes: an African American high school student who excels in the classroom, for instance, might be dismissed as "acting white." On the other hand, sincerity, as Jackson defines it, imagines authenticity as an incomplete measuring stick, an analytical model that attempts to deny people agency in their search for identity.

Drawing on more than ten years of ethnographic research in and around New York City, Jackson offers a kaleidoscope of subjects and stories that directly and indirectly address how race is negotiated in today's world—including tales of book-vending numerologists, urban conspiracy theorists, corrupt police officers, mixed-race neo-Nazis, and gospel choirs forbidden to catch the Holy Ghost. Jackson records and retells their interconnected sagas, all the while attempting to reconcile these stories with his own crisis of identity and authority as an anthropologist terrified by fieldwork. Finding ethnographic significance where mere mortals see only bricks and mortar, his invented alter ego Anthroman takes to the streets, showing how race is defined and debated, imposed and confounded every single day.

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