



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR WHAT TRUTH SOUNDS LIKE: ROBERT F. KENNEDY, JAMES BALDWIN, AND OUR UNFINISHED CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE IN AMERICA BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

1. Discuss the nature of the meeting between RFK and the black thinkers, artists and activists. Reflect on the meetings of other politicians and artists/entertainers/activists. Is there something appealing and productive about white political figures meeting with black figures who are not civil rights leaders?
2. There is a great deal of argument and debate over the social responsibility of artists in our day. How did Harry Belafonte, Lorraine Hansberry and Lena Horne view their roles as artists who were also politically active? Does art come first for such figures, or is it subsidiary to social conscience and political activism? What happens to our perception of artists when they become known primarily for their activism? This happened to Dick Gregory relatively early in his career, and to Harry Belafonte far later. Compare and contrast their cases.
3. How did – and does – gender and sexual identity impact our understanding of the legitimacy of artists, activists and intellectuals in the pursuit of racial justice? Given the prominence of intersectional analysis, how were its elements at play in the meeting between RFK and the black elite?
4. Discuss the generational tensions between older and younger black generations, both in the sixties and now. In the sixties, there were growing chasms and widening cleavages between older civil rights leaders and organizations, and younger freedom fighters and social rebels. In our day, are there tensions between sixties styles of protest and contemporary brands of social rebellion as glimpsed in Black Lives Matter?
5. Discuss the friction between Belafonte and Jay-Z. Is it merely generational, or are there other forces at work? Does it matter whether an artist is identified with traditional forms of protest versus other means and forms of resistance, from behind-the-scenes action to the use of new technology and media?
6. Discuss the huge impact of hip hop culture and its influence on American society, and how it has figured into “wokeness” among a younger generation of students, activists and thinkers.
7. Do black intellectuals have a moral obligation to take their work beyond the academic sphere? Discuss the impact of both Baldwin and Hansberry as writers and thinkers, and Kenneth Clark as a scholar and social psychologist. What are the peculiar roles and responsibilities of black public intellectuals?
8. Discuss the contretemps between Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Why is West persistently critical of Coates, Melissa Harris-Perry, Michael Eric Dyson and other (largely younger) thinkers and intellectuals? Is this generational tension and personal jealousy, or are there also political matters at stake? Or both?



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9. How does the figure of Barack Obama play in contemporary black politics? How does – and did – Obama’s presidency divide members of the black elite and broader black community? How did – and does – black criticism of Obama get interpreted among the masses? What is the role and responsibility of black thinkers and activists and entertainers in the first black presidency? Did they largely fail the black community?
10. Discuss the role of athletes in forging social conscience and awareness about the problems that plague black communities, especially police misconduct. How do contemporary athletes compare to those in the sixties and seventies? Discuss how Donald Trump’s presidency has not only underscored the resurgence of bigotry and rise to power of a toxic vision of whiteness, but has focused attention on the political activism and social resistance of black sports stars from LeBron James and Serena Williams to Colin Kaepernick to Swin Cash.

Questions provided by the publisher.



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