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## Reduced to the Small Screen

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Incident, Reaction, Forget, Repeat: Formulaic Entertainment Replaces Serious Discussion on Race

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Has racial conflict become amusement? Is the conversation about racism mere entertainment, dialogue rendered for show, inflammatory words tossed back and forth over a racial divide to excite an audience?

Thousands of black people are marooned after Hurricane Katrina amid government paralysis, and the race debate on TV kicks into overdrive. A black woman accuses some white men of rape at a [Duke University](#) party and the inflamed rhetoric flies.

Comedian [Michael Richards](#) shouts the N-word at a black man in a comedy club. Radio host [Don Imus](#) calls the [Rutgers University](#) women's basketball team "nappy-headed hos."

Shouts of injustice fill the small-town streets of [Jena, La.](#), after white teens are suspended from school for hanging nooses from a tree while black teens are charged with attempted murder for a schoolyard fight. Nooses are found at the [University of Maryland](#), the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, [Columbia University](#).

[Fox News's Bill O'Reilly](#) has his turn on the stage of race after dining at a famous soul food restaurant and musing at the surprising civility of black people. Then comes [James D. Watson](#), Nobel Prize winner and head of one of the world's leading genetics research institutes, questioning the intelligence of black people.

And with each episode in the long-running Saga of Race in America, a string of characters lines up to react to the latest eruption. The media records them as they take up positions in the Great Race Debate. The media stokes the discussion as self-proclaimed black leaders scream outrage while opponents -- often white, sometimes black -- scream counter-outrage. The "colorblind" wonder why we all just can't get along. And the rest of us watch from ringside, rooting for one camp or another, sometimes in silence.

Then inevitably, the media turns away. The outrage fades. The talking heads go silent. The curtain falls, and the debate recedes to wherever it goes until the next eruption.

Which raises the question: Has the debate over race become a melodrama? A bad television soap opera? A theatrical stage play with complex issues boiled down to a script? Entertaining words thrown around simply to satisfy the 24-hour news cycle, the blogosphere?

Are we doomed to debate racism over and over -- stuck in purgatory, a cycle of skirmishes, of shock

and awe, with nothing gained, nothing learned?

Or is there a way to change the ritual, to go deeper into our national consciousness and get off this merry-go-round?

### 'Putting On a Show'

There it was on television one afternoon, another episode in the Great Race Debate. A perky commentator moderated the banter between two intellectuals discussing the Jena 6 case and the debate over racial injustice.

Even with the sound off, it looked like entertainment, says Alan Bean, executive director of Friends of Justice, a [Texas](#)-based criminal justice reform organization that began probing the Jena 6 case long before it became big news. Bean was watching the show while sitting in an airport. That's when it occurred to him: The race debate had become theater.

"When I looked at the woman who was the correspondent refereeing the fight between two talking heads, I didn't get the impression she was concerned about enlightening the audience or coming to a meeting of the minds or shedding light on inequities in the criminal justice system," says Bean, who is white. "Her primary concern seemed to be putting on a show."

The talking-head debates about racial conflicts "exert a kind of car-wreck fascination," says John McWhorter, senior fellow at the conservative [Manhattan Institute](#).

The debates are like a "recreational source of psychological policing," McWhorter says, "which reminds me of the place that religious faith held in medieval society. Being charged with racism today is like being charged as a heretic in medieval [Europe](#). One must indulge in all kinds of gestures which one may or may not feel because to not do these things is to invite condemnation as a moral pervert."

The debate dissolves into a routine, "where all good thinking people are supposed to condemn that person," he says.

An example: Michael Richards's racist tirade at a comedy club in [Los Angeles](#), where he even evoked a lynching. His words were caught on tape and played over and over. Black leaders demanded an apology. Richards issued a statement and apologized again and again.

Then there was silence. Episode ended.

"And now here we are today and the whole humbug over that looks like the formulaic cartoon that it was," says McWhorter, who is black. "We know now and we knew then that what Michael Richards said some night in some club, in the grand scheme of things, was utterly insignificant. But there is a ritual that America has been going through for 40 years where we grab on to all and any opportunity to show we are morally pure in not being racist."

The Rev. [Al Sharpton](#) knows about this pattern, of course. Those accused of racism often go to him or to Rev. [Jesse Jackson](#) seeking absolution. Sharpton has carved out a leading role in racial matters. He defines himself, Jackson and others as strategists with a goal. But he is aware that some people define him as a demagogue.

"Don't assume that because a lot of us are screaming and hollering in the middle, we don't have a

strategy," he says. The media "try to reduce us to being performers on their stage rather than thinkers in our studies."

Of his penitent radio show guests, such as Richards and Imus, Sharpton says, "I think that they want to appear like they want absolution, but I really don't think that's what they want."

But he plays along, hosting them on his show as part of an orchestrated trap. In the case of Imus, Sharpton wanted him fired, and he wanted his employers to change their policy regarding racial language.

"I wanted to make it very clear to people why it is that I'm going after them, and to let them trap themselves with their own language," he said.

On the Sharpton show, Imus complained that he just could not win with "you people." Sharpton and many other African Americans find that phrase offensive. More fuel for the Great Race Debate.

In April, Imus was fired. The punishment didn't last. He's set to return to the airwaves next month.

And the race show goes on.

### **'A Public Conversation'**

If the debate over racism has indeed become entertainment, many say the media and the entertainment business are to blame for encouraging searing sound bites and rhetorical racial skirmishes instead of forums for intellectual discussion.

Most of the infamous episodes of late have been white on black -- except for the ongoing anti-immigrant rhetoric, which many view as discriminatory against Latinos, and not just by whites.

Whether it's about blacks, Latinos, whites, whatever, the race rhetoric has transfixed audiences on television, in blogs and in newspapers for months. Often it is covered as if the debate was simple enough for soundbites. And that, some say, is the problem.

"I think the media's contribution is to make racism an entertainment issue," says Ted Morgan, professor of political science at Lehigh University, whose upcoming book is about the media culture.

"Television makes politics entertaining by turning politics into polarized conflict between two sides," he says. "The audience sympathizes with one side or the other because they are basically getting entertained. It leaves the public with no place in the conversation."

The media treats racism the same way, says Morgan, who is white.

"A public conversation isn't what you get when you tune into the nightly news," he says. "TV is trying to give us a lot of drama, conflict, pictures, basically to entertain us, keep us there watching that channel. That is not a venue that is compatible with public conversation."

Pueng Vongs, diversity committee chair for the Society of Professional Journalists, one of the largest associations of journalists in the country, says racially charged comments -- much like shootings and fires -- have become "big clicker stories," that drive up traffic on news organization Web sites.

News has been molded to fit the short attention span of viewers, Vongs says.

"With the Internet there is a constant hunger for something new and exciting to get hits or with broadcast media to get the viewers," Vongs says.

While the media provides context for events and a frame of reference by which people understand each other and the broader culture, they also perpetuate stereotypes and fuel sensationalism in the race debate, says Doreen Loury, assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at Arcadia University outside [Philadelphia](#), where she teaches a course called "African American Images in the Media."

"I think it needs to do what it was charged to do," Loury, who is black, says of the news media. "It was charged to look at a situation and report . . . with some accuracy, not to look at racism as the flavor of the month."

"Objectivity is the key," she continues. "I know not every white person in Jena is a racist, but most of us think that now. The [media] objectivity isn't there. It's all about getting the story and not about getting the angle of the story to enhance the dialogue."

"Racism is a rough thing and it's real," she says. "I'm tired of people treating it as entertainment."

### **How White People Might See It**

Racism. Isn't that the real rub here? Isn't all the shouting and hyperventilating and finger-pointing in the Great Race Debate about racism, its presence or its absence?

Let's put racism on the couch for a minute. Analyze it, get it to explain its tendency to persist despite attempts to kill it.

Often, whites don't see it -- or don't want to see it. Often, blacks know it is there -- or are primed to believe it is. That is the deep divide in how black and white Americans see racism, says John Dovidio, a [Yale](#) psychology professor.

That perception gap is complicated by the evolution of racism into a more "quiet" phenomenon, often viewed "as an exception, not typical," he says.

"From the perspective of the majority group, racism is not a big issue. We don't see it often. When we see it, we can explain it away," says Dovidio, author of "Prejudice, Discrimination and Racism."

"In surveys, 60 to 70 percent of white Americans say racism is a thing of the past," he says.

"From a white person's view, when certain incidents occur that are blatant, it is easy to recognize them, but the outrage is more localized. If you don't believe racism is widespread, you think once you take care of that little event, you can go back to business as usual. . . .

"Like Michael Richards: People were outraged. We have the debate. But because these are seen as rare and atypical events, they become like entertainment."

The problem in solving racism lies first in seeing it, says Dovidio, who is white. As with any process of healing, one must acknowledge the injury to get better.

The inability of many whites to acknowledge racism has a deep impact on the way race is discussed in society, because white people "control the discourse on what constitutes race in this country," says Paula Rothenberg, a senior fellow at City University in [New York](#) and author of "White Privilege:

Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism."

"The reality is [in] every aspect of life -- economic, social, political -- white people benefit from the way the system is organized and black people experience deficiency," says Rothenberg, who is white. "The system is constructed so that it appears to be fair and just and neutral to all, when in fact white people inherit white supremacy and benefits. . . .

"White people are more likely to be hired. More likely to be paid higher salaries. Treated fairly. More likely to be assumed good people and kind people. . . . Every aspect of the system is rigged to benefit whites and to criticize or challenge people of color."

### **How Black People Might See It**

For black Americans, the experience is the mirror opposite of whites. The eruptions do not appear to be merely isolated, but become more dots in the picture providing evidential clarity that racism is indeed real.

"Sixty to 70 percent of black Americans see racism as a continuing problem in America," Dovidio says. "Events will occur and minorities will see it not as an isolated event, but the tip of the iceberg of what they have been experiencing."

There is a genuine reaction not only to one offending event but a whole series of events in the past, says Dovidio.

"It confirms racism is out there and becomes a great way of pointing out racism is out there."

Because black people are aware that the broader society is often deaf to allegations of racism, "We get mad and feel like we have to express that we are mad," says Camille Z. Charles, associate director of the Center for Africana Studies at the [University of Pennsylvania](#).

Some black people then want to force society to hear their sense of grievance, thinking, "You have to acknowledge there was a wrong. I'm going to make you acknowledge that," says Charles, who is black.

But some argue that racism has been perpetuated, kept alive by people who benefit from the show. Benefit from stoking white guilt. Benefit from encouraging victimhood.

Robert L. Woodson, founder and president of the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, calls such people "grievance merchants whose purpose in life is to racialize every situation conceivable without finding out what the facts are."

"Race is an intimidating issue," says Woodson, who is black. "If you want people to back off, all you have to do is inject race, and all the rules of dialogue, all the rules of comity are set aside. You are either for the people who are charging racism or you are for injustice."

Racism gets boiled down into inflammatory words, thrown like swords. Woodson argues that of course racism still exists, but people of color, particularly those with lower incomes, are hurt by perpetuated notions of their victimization.

Woodson, who worked in the civil rights movement, contrasts the marches of today with those of that era and its goal of fostering unity. "In today's world, the purpose is never to unite," he says. "The

purpose is to make cheap headlines in the name of being champions of injustice. They are entertainers. I call them civil rights reenactors. Just like Civil War reenactors dress up and act like we are in still the Civil War."

Black people, as a group, are still beset by intractable problems, says Shelby Steele, who is black. He is author of "White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era."

Steele lists poverty, single-parent families, high school dropout rates. "But what do we do? Talk about Don Imus and Michael Richards and do nothing to explore the 70 percent illegitimacy rate." Yet, when it comes to race relations, he says, the country has made remarkable progress.

"White America has undergone a marvelous if unremarked moral evolution in the last 40 years and racism is no longer the barrier that it used to be," says Steele, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at [Stanford University](#). "That doesn't mean it no longer exists, that it is no longer present. But it no longer stunts the life of black people.

"We have come to the point where we can entertain ourselves with it," he says, adding sarcastically, "Isn't that wonderful?"

### **And the Cycle Starts Again**

And the Great Race Debate goes on. Nooses still appear, roiling the racial landscape. In the category of contrition, Duane "Dog" Chapman, TV's "Dog the Bounty Hunter," issued an apology late last month for using the N-word to describe his son's girlfriend. (His reality show was canceled.)

There's never a shortage of fodder for the race debate. And no shortage of people to comment, whether to enlighten or just to stir up the rancor.

Steele often is asked to participate in televised discussions. But sometimes the format is "racist," he says.

"I will not be in a situation where we have a white moderator and two blacks screaming at each other. That is profanity. It is gladiatorial, where blacks fight for the amusement of whites. And the white moderator never takes a stand, never tells you what he or she thinks. . . . Whites can say we are having a discussion on race. And whites will not tell you what they think. They come to blacks to get statements because only blacks have the moral authority to speak about race. That is how the formula gets established. I've always resented it."

Abigail Thernstrom, a white member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, says the race debate is one-sided because white people are afraid of revealing their thoughts in a climate of anger and accusation.

"People are afraid of saying the wrong thing, something that can be labeled as racially questionable," says Thernstrom. "It stifles the debate and lessens our public lives because there's much to be debated."

So the show goes on. The debate over racism becomes as predictable as reruns on basic cable. The audience watches the Great Race Debate for a while, then changes the channel -- until the next episode.

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