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Let's, um, try talking about race

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You might not know it from looking at her resume — which includes everything from Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* to Jim Belushi's *The Principal* — but actress Rae Dawn Chong is a scarred veteran of America's race and culture wars.

Outspoken director Spike Lee often used her as a bitter example of black actors who pandered to white prejudices for steady work. And her Facebook page recounts struggling for roles when a '90s-era boom of black-centered films left the multiracial daughter of comic Tommy Chong looking too ethnic for mainstream films and not ethnic enough for black films.

So when she considers the possible impact of Barack Obama's election as America's 44th president, Chong sees it all as a fortysomething performer often caught between several different cultures in America.

"I'm relieved there's a beige face in the White House," she said, calling from her home in New Hampshire. "I might get into trouble saying this, but I think we (as black people) could use a little more emotional maturity. That's one thing I'm hoping Obama can usher in. I'm hoping we can be a little less sensitive about things that make people scared of us."

Fueled by excitement over Obama's historic victory, early discussions about the impact of electing the nation's first nonwhite president have often focused on shattering an important racial barrier.

But as the immediate euphoria fades, more complex conversations about America's ideas on race and culture have emerged. And some of the dialogue may not feel so uplifting.

Challenging the Victim Role

For Chong, who describes herself as African, Canadian, Cherokee, Chinese and Irish, the election raised two important questions:

Can black people get beyond the victim roles which have traditionally fueled discussion of race in America? And can the nation resolve racial inequities without constant nagging from people of color?

"If your whole life has been spent in victim mode and you have an opportunity where you are not a victim, who are you now?" Chong said. "I'm not negating the reality that there still isn't a level playing field. But are we ready to give up our identity of being victims?"

But Chong's words also highlight a fear of consultant Carmen Van Kerckhove, co-founder of New Demographic, a New York-based diversity education firm.

Her concern: that many people who began thinking about race deeply for the first time during this election will assume Obama's success means such issues have mostly been conquered.

"It's obvious there are many whites who want to distance themselves from the spectre of racism which has dogged us in the

past," Van Kerckhove said. "Whether this amounts to substantive change remains to be seen. The danger now is to make sure that people don't feel that simply by voting for Obama they've done their part."

Van Kerckhove recalled a recent dialogue on race she organized among employees at a Fortune 100 company, an initiative inspired by election talk. There, she saw white executives learn an important lesson: Race issues aren't just a concern for people of color.

"Some white executives felt they had nothing to contribute. … They had no perspective on race," she said. "Because I think a lot of white people are conditioned to think of themselves as a neutral force, when they're not."

The Obama campaign as Rorschach test

There may be few people in Hollywood who benefit more from Obama's election than Nick Adams, author of a satirical book on race issues called *Making Friends with Black People* that NBC agreed to develop as a series less than two weeks after the presidential election.

But Adams, a sharp-witted standup comic who once worked at Black Entertainment Television and Roseanne Barr's short-lived talk show, still isn't sure how he feels about some of the racial dialogue Obama's candidacy inspired.

"Yeah, he got elected … but this election kinda revealed how stupid and racist some part of America still is," said Adams, who is black. "You look at some of those videos after the Sarah Palin rallies or listen to Rush Limbaugh … and it's as if Obama was some black guy working the register at a liquor store who decided to become president. I mean, if he was trying to trick everyone into electing a secret Muslim president, would he stick with the name Barack Hussein Obama?"

Adams hopes that his show, a comedy about a complex relationship between two friends, one black and one white, will encapsulate some of the discussions people are having now across race, thanks to our new chief executive.

"What America has lacked for some time is real honest interaction," Adams said. "I've always been of the idea that this country tends to stick its head in the sand when it comes to talking about race. Hopefully, now the discussion won't die down."

At the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, psychology researcher Linda Tropp has spent years investigating the ways in which groups of people communicate across race and culture.

The research studies she's done indicate that cross-racial interaction not only gives people more information about an unfamiliar group, it eases their emotional anxiety and helps them to better empathize with an unfamilar group.

So, while the prospect of a President Obama might have unsettled some unused to seeing black people in positions of power, the reality of his administration might defuse a lot of racial anxiety.

"Seeing Biden and Obama's families hugging each other … images of whites across the country rallying for Obama … it can also change black people's views of whites," said Tropp, who is white. "I know from so many conversations with my black friends, that some didn't think this would happen. And to see so many white people supporting Obama may challenge that perception a bit."

Is Obama really black anyway?

Almost immediately after the news media began to hail Obama's election as the first black president, some began to ask: Is he really?

The simple answer is that journalists call Obama black because he calls himself black — as much a recognition of the culture he has chosen to live in and reflect in his personal life as any biological lineage.

Still, the notion that anyone can choose their race — a designation which can affect everything from which church you attend to whom you marry — may be another new concept for an increasingly multiethnic country to wrap its brain around.

"Race is social construct, and Obama is a person who refers to himself as a black man," said Roy Kaplan, a professor in the Africana Studies department of the University of South Florida, who is white. "I think it's causing a lot of consternation among people resistant to change. Because it's not so simple to put people in these categories anymore."

Consultant Van Kerckhove wondered if some people resist calling Obama black because they find black culture troubling. And she knows other people of color who worry that emphasizing his blackness excludes *them*.

"They feel that, by the media calling him the first black president and making it a black thing, it's negating the reason they supported him," she said, noting that Obama's biracial heritage and time growing up in Indonesia and Hawaii was appealing to many ethnic groups. "He's always been inclusive to all ethnicities."

Is a national dialogue on race possible?

What may be most ironic: Even as Obama's success kicks off a rush of conversation on race and culture — a national dialogue he called for in his landmark speech on race in March — the man himself has largely avoided talking directly about such issues, refusing to become a spokesman on race the way more traditional black politicians have.

"I thought, 'That's it — he invited people to have this conversation and then pulled his chair back from the table,' " said Michele Norris, co-host of National Public Radio's afternoon news show *All Things Considered*. "I'm not mad at him for that … he was like this open template. When it came to race, people saw in him many different things."

Norris and *Morning Edition* co-host Steve Inskeep responded by creating their own conversation, pulling together an ethnically diverse panel of 15 people in York, Pa., for three different discussions throughout the campaign and after the election. Both anchors said having a discussion led by a black woman (Norris) and white man (Inskeep) was important.

What they found might not be a surprise to some: Black people there thought about race more often than the white people and talked about it more easily. Black people worried about seeming too angry; white people worried about accusations of racism.

And real dialogue, where people revealed honest, sometimes embarrassing notions about race and culture, only came after hours of talking in a very comfortable setting.

"Everyone is aware that you can say the wrong thing and it can ruin you life or cost you your job," said Inskeep, who wrote a column for NPR.org reflecting on how some white people have a formula for talking about race, which includes references to a racism-free childhood and prejudice-free personal views. What Norris learned was that people, white and black, want to have the conversation, as long as it's in a safe environment where participants can learn from each other.

"Time is key, because it takes a while to build trust," she said, noting that after the election, even panel participants who voted against Obama seemed encouraged by the hopeful spirit of his supporters. "We were told that people said things in the room they had never said before. And when we were done, we were exhausted, but they wouldn't leave."

That may be how Obama's national dialogue on difference unfolds: small conversations by Americans acting on their own — ripples of water from a giant rock tossed in our communal pond.

"Obama is not our racial messiah," said Van Kerckhove, the consultant. "He's not the guy with all the answers. To look at him to lead us (on this) isn't realistic. He's got a few other things on his plate, you know?"

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