

BOOK REVIEW



**Hartigan, J. (2010). *What can you say? America's national conversation on race.*
Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.**

Reviewed by

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The book started as a collection of stories illustrating racism in present-day America. These stories reflect a point of heightened racial awareness: “the underlying dynamics of American culture” (x). The author sees these stories as opportunities for eliciting a “national conversation on race,” since race is a political and polarizing issue.

The author sees race becoming a polemic and ambiguous issue where one can no longer draw a clear line between what is racist and what is not. Examples of this ambiguity include “gangsta” parties hosted by students in various universities (some being held on Martin Luther Day). These parties play on racial stereotypes; however, students do not think of them as racist. One student remarks, “we aren’t trying to be *racial* or anything...We invited all races and types of people and never meant any racial harm” (2). A black student comments: “they didn’t know that they were being racist. It’s really sad” (4).

The author sees racism as a fact of American culture. Despite its ambiguity, racism is always thought of as a moral failing. Apology has become the fast track toward escaping the stigma of racism. Racism now exists in a masked way: “Niggardly,” a word of Norwegian origin meaning stingy, is either avoided or used to encode racial hate. In this culture of heightened racial sensitivity, racial hatred is encoded or anticipated in innocuous words like niggardly, causing “racial paranoia” (8).

In a “national conversation on race,” racial moments often involve “disagreement[s] over the interpretation of ambiguous facts and over contested goals” (10). The media mostly captures these racial incidents. Racial incidents and arguments characteristically surface with strength and a sense of controversy, and then recede, normally with an apology showing that the person who said or did what

he or she said or did is really a good person who did not mean harm, thereby stopping the conversation on race. For example, when Imus referred to black female basketball players as “hos,” he later apologized and said he was a good man and he meant it in a playful way, no racial innuendo was intended. Likewise, when Michael Richards shouted the “N-word” at a black person in public, saying “Throw his ass out! He’s a n....You interrupted me, pal. That’s what you get for interrupting the white man” (31), he later apologized in public and said that he was angry. Apology is the quickest way to avoid being stigmatized as racist. At the same time, apology is a setback in the context of a national conversation on race. It becomes the “conversation stopper” (141): a ritual of repentance where after the racial slur there is the usual apology and perhaps someone being fired from their position. The conversation on race does not end in addressing the problem of racial inequality but only in “clean[ing] up the airwaves” (53). The Barack Obama movement gave a sense that “Race doesn’t matter.” Obama became a promise of a new age to replace “old partisan politics” (92). His presidential race and election created a powerful moment for a “conversation on race,” not only about the fact that “race does not matter,” but also whether Obama is black enough or black in skin but not in identity.

The book does not offer a definite solution or resolution for race and racism in America but it shares in the general conversation on race and shows that culture is dynamic – in flux. This conversation continues to shape and reshape American culture and is a way for culture to become progressively aware and conscious of itself.

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