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'Big Brother' and the Commercialization of Race

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, July 4th, 2013

Last week's Supreme Court decision, invalidating Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, was notable because it affirmed the political right's contention that racism is dead in America–or, at most, relatively insignificant. Chief Justice John Roberts, writing for the 5-4 majority, and Justice Clarence Thomas, in a separate concurring opinion, echoed each other's words in saying that "America has changed."

Certainly America has changed since 1965, when the Voting Rights Act was passed. Racial attitudes have moderated, but they have not disappeared. Witness the Paula Deen fiasco, and the Trayvon Martin murder trial. As a further exhibit, take a look at these outtake racist slurs from the CBS show *Big Brother:*

Let's go meta for a moment. On top of the obviously racist and homophobic comments of some of the contestants, commercial interests are at play. Why, for example, hasn't CBS sent YouTube a take-down notice, asking them to pull this video clip? Because controversy is good for business, and if the controversy is based on ugly stereotypes, so be it. From a financial perspective, maybe that's even better.

Paula Deen's use of racial epithets was bad for her personally, but it stoked the ratings on Fox News and MSNBC for a week. Courtroom cameras in the Trayvon Martin case have buoyed CNN. There's an online petition drive to dump Aaryn and Gina Marie, the Big Brother contestants in this video, and that will surely help the series even as CBS shifts its schedule to pump up the ratings.

Yes, America has changed since 1965. Racial politics are commercialized today in a way they weren't 50 years ago.

Photo: The cast of Big Brother 15, courtesy CBS.

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