

# How *Roots* and *Black. White.* Broke Racial TV Ground

Nearly 30 years apart, two ground-breaking series provided meaningful examinations of race relations in America, both historically and in contemporary society.

By Richard G. Carter

**T**o these wizened eyes, the true test of a special television show touted as “thoughtful” or “worthwhile” its relevance to the present day. This includes entertainment vehicles, miniseries, documentaries or reality shows. And since race relations remains America’s most important domestic issue, I pay attention when this subject is dealt with seriously.

Arguably, the two most meaningful examinations of race in America, with distinctly different approaches, occurred nearly 30 years apart. One was *Roots*—an Emmy-winning, ground-breaking, 12-hour, eight-night miniseries that ran on ABC in January, 1977. The other was *Black. White.*—a stunning, documentary-reality miniseries on FX cable which aired for six weeks in one-hour segments in March and April 2006.

A third candidate is the award-winning

PBS documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* (1987). The late Henry Hampton’s nonfiction project dealt powerfully with the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s, its players and its aftermath.

All three of these powerful programs should be “must-see” for every man, woman and child in America. But when push comes to shove, I defer to *Roots* and *Black. White.* as TV’s most thoughtful portrayals of race—and racial tensions—in America.

While *Roots* essentially presented race from a black perspective, it took pains to explore the changing feelings of whites. The show often dealt with harsh physical suffering endured by blacks in the antebellum South, but also explored the tortured existence of those seeking to better themselves via learning and violent revolt against slave masters.



(from left) Nick Sparks, Brian Sparks, Renee Sparks



Blacks in whiteface  
(from left) Renee Sparks, Brian Sparks, Nick Sparks

The quest for dignity by enslaved blacks in *Roots* was heart-wrenching, and Lou Gossett's memorable "Fiddler" was a role for the ages. And the empathy of some of those oppressed with the likes of the white Brad Davis, as the unforgettable, dirt-poor "Ol' George Johnson," also brought tears to millions of viewers' eyes.

On the other hand, the contemporary *Black. White.* delved deeply into some of the ongoing negative racial attitudes of both races—including a troubling lack of interest in racial matters by a teenage black male and the exact opposite by a female white teenager. Moreover, their more comparative parents were locked and loaded for a racial firefight.

Now for some background.

One of the most telling things about history in this age of enhanced media coverage—including cataclysmic events of the last quarter century—is remembering where you were and what you were doing at the time. And television news bulletins led the way in alerting millions of us to all manner of gut-wrenching mayhem.

Topping my list are the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963; the televised murder two days later of his accused killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, by Jack Ruby; and the horrific murders of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (April 4, 1968), and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (June 5, 1968).

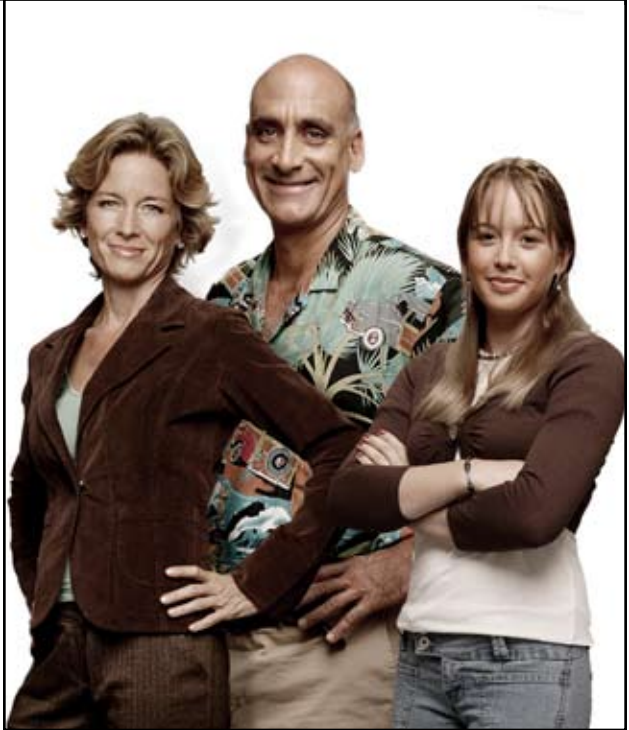
I can recite chapter and verse

of my activities on each of these awful dates in the turbulent 1960s. That's how vividly I recall them and how critical they were to me and millions of others around the country, and the world. Indeed, I don't want to forget them.

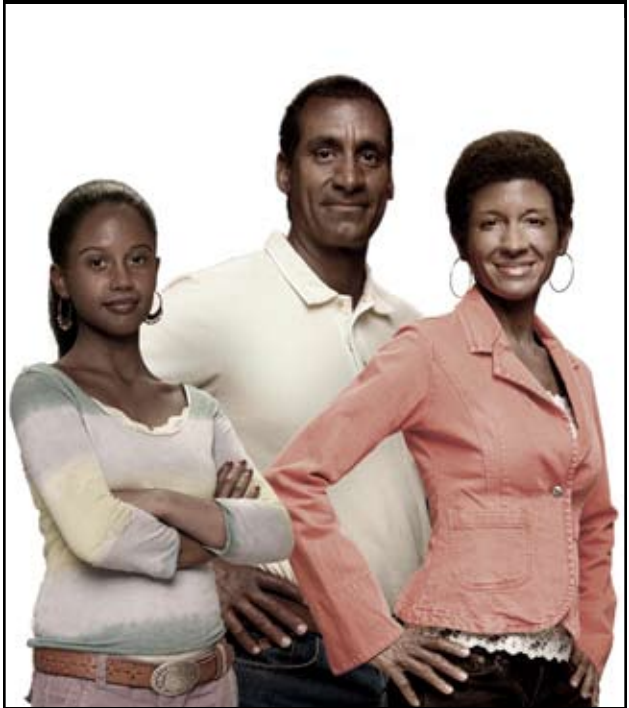
Yet, among the most cherished TV memories of my lifetime, about which much of today's youth is unaware, is *Roots*, the race-based, epoch-making megaminiseries. This outstanding artistic achievement from early 1977—perhaps ABC's all-time best—was lovingly recalled in a one-hour, NBC tribute in January 2002.

Marketed as a work of historical fact, *Roots* is based on the late Alex Haley's landmark, Pulitzer Prize-winning book tracing the origins of his family in Africa. Ironically, ABC-TV chose not to air the nostalgic look-back in honor of its 25th anniversary. Why the originating network took a pass on running its own special is anybody's guess. Perhaps it was due to allegations that the content of Haley's book was, according to critics disputing his genealogical research, "a historical hoax."

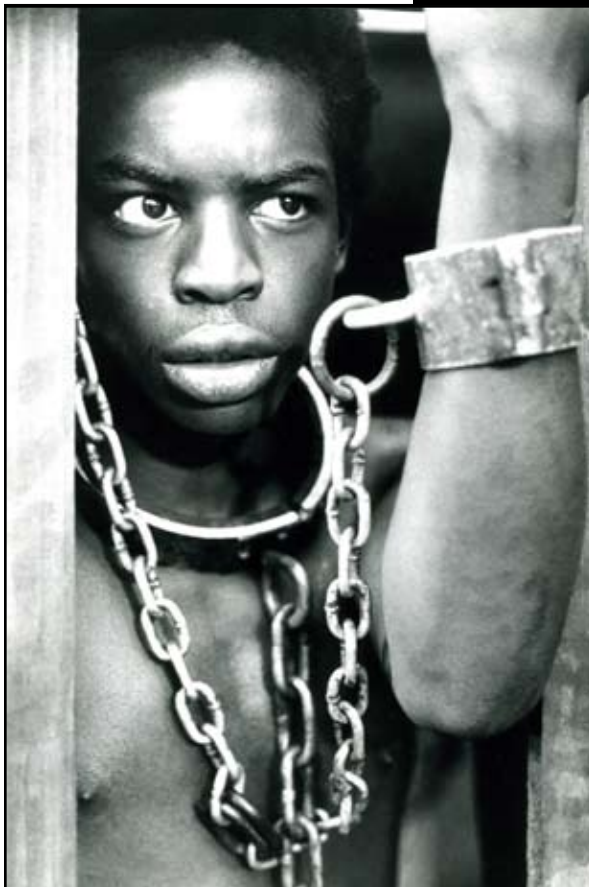
I was living and working in Cleveland when the star-studded *Roots* came on the air that frigid January. And right from the start, the sight and sound of so many gifted black actors warmed my heart. In all, the 62 principal cast members were a veritable directory of big movie and TV stars of the 1960s and '70s.



(from left) Carmen Wurgel, Bruno Marcotulli,  
Rose Bloomfield



**Whites in blackface**  
(from left) Rose Bloomfield, Bruno Marcotulli,  
Carmen Wurgel



LeVar Burton as Kunta Kinte in *Roots*.

With apologies to those I don't have space to mention, black names also included LeVar Burton as protagonist Kunta Kinte, along with John Amos, Maya Angelou, Olivia Cole, Scatman Crothers, Ji-Tu Cumbaka, Moses Gunn, Lawrence Hilton Jacobs, Lynne Moody, Lillian Randolph, Thalmus Rasulala, Richard Roundtree, Madge Sinclair, O.J. Simpson, Raymond St. Jacques, Cicely Tyson, Leslie Uggams and Ben Vereen.

## **Roots was a special experience—for white people as well as black.**

Notable white actors included Ed Asner, Lloyd Bridges, MacDonald Carey, Chuck Connors, Lynda Day,

Sandy Duncan, Loren Green, George Hamilton, Burl Ives, Doug McClure, Vic Morrow, Robert Reed and Ralph Waite.

There is little doubt *Roots* was a special experience—for white people as well as black. During its run the show was a daily topic of conversation at workplace coffee machines, water coolers and cafeterias, as well as business lunches everywhere. Regardless of the knowledge of history by adult whites, many were horrified at the hardships inflicted upon blacks during slavery. And my black friends also found scenes of the brutality hard to take. The program proved to be a catharsis and a wake-up call for much of America.

But remembering *Roots* also means remembering tender moments. The touching scenes of black family loyalty, pride and love are stamped on my brain. And recalling the youthful Burton's insistence that his name is, indeed, Kunta Kinte

is something I will never forget. Here's hoping this towering miniseries someday will be rerun in its entirety.

Now to the more recent *Black. White.* which I checked out after reading about its unique premise. And I wasn't disappointed. During its six-week run on FX cable last March and April, this documentary-type reality miniseries turned out to be riveting, must-see TV. In case you missed it, here's the deal:

Through use of innovative make-up and prosthetics, a black family of three becomes outwardly white and a white family of three becomes black. The idea is for each to experience life in a new way to better understand the

other half. From the start, it was clear the blacks were far more racially aware than the whites—just as in America today.

Before proceeding, I must say the switch from white-to-black was more convincing than the black-to-white. As a black man myself, I felt the black family looked more Latino than white—especially the mother. Had I encountered 41-year-old Brian Sparks, his wife, Renee, 38, and 16-year-old son, Nick, as white in their makeup, I doubt if I'd bought it.

### **The head-in-the-sand attitude of teenage Nick—including not caring when he was called “nigger”—was mind-boggling.**

Their transformation reminded me of Melvin Van Peebles' stunning, quasi-comedy “Watermelon Man” (1970), with the late Godfrey Cambridge as a bigoted white man. His skin color makeup was a real stretch. But when he turned black overnight—to the horror of his white wife, played by Estelle Parsons—reality set in. But that's because Cambridge again was playing himself and looked like himself.

Despite this shortcoming and incessant commercial interruptions, *Black. White.* provided vital insights into race relations. Co-produced by rapper-actor Ice Cube and experienced documentarian R.J. Cutler, it ranks with *Roots* and *Rich Man, Poor Man* as, the best and most addictive miniseries I've ever seen.

However, the aspect of the show I found most interesting and troubling was the generation gap in the black family. The head-in-the-sand attitude of teenage Nick in racial matters—including not caring when he was called “nigger”—was mind-boggling. I appreciated his parents'

belated efforts to clue him in to life in racist America.

As a serious, reality-type TV program, *Black. White.* was wildly successful. Filmed in summer 2005 in the Los Angeles area, viewers were exposed to racially tinged incidents through the eyes, ears and personal experiences of very different people in very different families. It was a noble undertaking and altogether believable.

Yet, for at least three of the six participants, the goals of the project seemed to go in one ear and out the other. Two of the white—47-year-old Bruno Marcotulli, and his long-time partner, Carmen Wurgel, 48—never

really got it. However, Carmen's blonde daughter, Rose, 18, seemed to grasp the true significance of what was happening and actually learned. But it all seemed too deep for her teenage black counterpart, Nick.

It didn't take long for sparks to fly as the racially naive Carmen set the tone early. Laughing, she said to Renee, “Yo, bitch!” in an ill-advised effort to invoke black vernacular. The outspoken Renee was incredulous and harped on this faux pas for the remainder of the series, strongly castigating Carmen for her disrespect and demonstrated lack of understanding.

Brian, the enlightened black father, joined Renee in her outrage and also took down Bruno for defending Carmen and trying to minimize the explosive comment. Finally, in the last episode, Renee relented a bit and forgave Carmen for her blunder—which was not the only time the white woman put her foot in her mouth out of utter ignorance and naïveté.

But the overbearing Bruno was worse—as close-minded as they come—clinging to the idea that anti-black bigotry is mainly in the mind. This man would not admit that conspicuous acts of racism occur, even after going out in public in black makeup. He was oblivious and didn't want to know, and his final letter to the group was a caustic cop-out.

Now back to Nick, the irresponsible, bad-attitude black teenager whose loony outlook on life made me wonder where he's been and what he's been doing. One of his revealing scenes was in a restaurant when he approached a table-full of his white friends and one laughingly blurted out, "Hey, my nigger." Nick smiled in apparent approval.

In addition, Nick hinted that he "might" be a gangster and made light of being kicked out of high school because he didn't like being told what to do. And despite being jobless, he paid \$150 for a wrist watch because, as he lamely explained, "I saw it and I liked it."

After his mother, Renee, loudly scolded him with "What's wrong with

you, Negro," for paying so much for something he didn't need, his father, Brian, accompanied him to the jewelry store in a mall to return the watch. Then they went to a black barbershop where, at Brian's behest, the barber tried to explain some racial facts of life to Nick.

In the final episode, Brian exposed Nick to some multi-media images of the black civil rights struggle over the years, and an ex-gang-banger named Kenny took him for a drive through a gang-infested neighborhood. While quietly lecturing him on the downside of a life of crime, Nick's facade crumbled a bit and he seemed to start to see the light.

*Black. White.* was a compelling portrayal of an aspect of life in which countless whites have no interest. But everyone, white and black, who watched with an open mind, was skillfully exposed to a slice of America's rampant racial dilemma. And Kenny's impassioned explanation of the power inherent in the project to the many creative people involved—with special emphasis on Nick—provided a forceful, lasting image.

---

Richard G. Carter, a New York freelance writer, was a columnist and editorial writer with the *New York Daily News*. He has appeared on *Larry King Live* and *The Phil Donahue Show* and co-hosted *Showdown* on CNBC with the late Morton Downey Jr. He was Vice President-Public Affairs with Group W Cable and in 1986 received the Marquette University By-Line Award for distinguished achievement in journalism.