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They never mean it, do they?

Comedian Michael Richards didn't mean to exude racism when he exploded in an N-word tirade at a heckler during a performance.

Actor Mel Gibson didn't mean to exude anti-Semitism when he drunkenly blamed Jews for the world's wars.

And following the curious pattern, radio personality Don Imus didn't mean to demean and humiliate those Rutgers University basketball players when he called them "nappy-headed hos."

They never mean it. It's as if some involuntary reflex makes them do it -- perhaps anger, in Richards case; or alcohol in Gibson's. But how to explain Imus? He tried to generate some edgy laughs for an audience that delights in the daily shots he takes at whomever he feels like shooting (blacks, gays, women, especially Sen. Hillary Clinton). Or perhaps, some suggest, the episodes reflect an impulse toward racism and sexism, forever lurking just beneath the surface of public life, judging by the number of episodes we have witnessed in recent years.

Racism? That word. So many bristle at it, wishing it weren't so, denying its existence, calling those who raise it paranoid. Like it isn't a fact of American life.

Jim Sleeper, a lecturer at Yale University and author of "Liberal Racism: How Fixating on Race Subverts the American Dream," is not all together comfortable with the word "racism." He believes it's often flung about carelessly, as part of what he calls a "blame game" that damages race relations further.

And yet he acknowledges that these words as weapons don't just spring from mistakes or gaffes, but from some deep recess within.

"Whatever it is, it's in them," Sleeper says of the animus that propels bile from men who, with their public platforms, could be helping propel the nation's racial discourse forward. "Instead, they're carriers of the virus rather than cures."

Roger Wilkins knows racism, has witnessed it, experienced it, studied it.

"It's deep in the culture," he says. A George Mason University professor and author of "Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism," he talks of the comfort zone that has been afforded many in the majority culture, white men in particular, to exercise a kind of systemic social superiority that allows them to put down folks of a different kind. It's what Wilkins calls "white male privilege" and the "psychic comfort" it offers.

"I think with Imus it really is that he's been getting away with so much stuff for so long that he misjudged the size his comfort zone," said Wilkins.

Indeed, suddenly Imus seems rather squeezed, beset by the innocence of the young women of Rutgers, by the broadcast companies that have, suddenly, decided to pull his coattails with that two-week suspension; by the professional haranguing of the likes of the Rev. Al Sharpton, who is not without baggage in the realm of public excoriation, owing to his inflammatory past as a rabble-rouser connected to a case of fabricated police abuse.

"I find it amazing that Reverend Al Sharpton has become the ethical officer for America," says Mitchell Moss of New York University.

Some have pointed out that young women are routinely and unfortunately called "hos" in some rap lyrics. "That doesn't make it any more right for anyone to say it, it doesn't matter if you are African American, Caucasian, Asian, it really doesn't matter," said Rutgers team captain Essence Carson at a news conference yesterday. "All that matters is it's wrong."

Sometimes there's a price to pay.

Former Virginia senator George Allen lost his reelection campaign after he lobbed an ethnic slur meaning monkey at an opposition campaign worker. And early this year "Grey's Anatomy" star Isaiah Washington was forced to undergo behavioral counseling when he derided a co-star for being gay.

The infamy of the loose tongue has plagued public figures for decades. In the late 1980s, House Republican leader Robert H. Michel pined on television for the "fun" of the days of "Amos 'n' Andy." Los Angeles Dodgers executive Al Campanis was fired after saying in a 1987 TV interview that blacks weren't qualified for sports management jobs and, more strangely, that they lacked "buoyancy" in a swimming pool. And who could forget sports commentator Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder lauding the breeding in the days of slavery that he said produced the black athlete of today? He predicted darkly that "if blacks take over coaching like everybody wants them to, there is not

going to be anything left for the white people."

Afterward, Snyder said, "I apologized. I admitted I made a mistake in what I said and how I said it and was willing to let my record speak for itself." CBS fired him anyway.

Of his "hos" comment, Imus said pretty much the same thing yesterday on "Today." "It was comedy. It wasn't a malicious rant. I wasn't angry. I wasn't drunk. I wasn't stating some sort of philosophy. As I stated yesterday morning, I'm not a racist. And I've demonstrated that in my deeds and my works."

This is the classic appeal to the "authentic self," says Orlando Patterson, a Harvard University sociologist. In other words, trying to override bad behavior by pushing the notion that deep down you are a good person. It goes like this:

"You've just got to believe I'm a good person. You've got to believe me. I'm telling you and this is the truth."

"It's a kind of arrogance, if you ask me," says Patterson.

This lack of honesty, this denial, could be a reason this unfortunate phenomenon of bilious public language keeps happening again and again and again, Patterson said.

This time, the young female athletes of Rutgers are collateral damage, their courageous basketball season forever associated with the "nappy-headed ho" slur.

Team member Matee Ajavon said yesterday: "I think it kind of scars us. We grew up in a world where, of course, racism exists and there's nothing we can do to change that. I think we've come a long way from where we were, you know, dealing with slavery. . . . But I think this has scarred me for life."