“The C-word” meets “the N-word”: The slur-once-removed and the discursive construction of "reverse racism"

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Introduction

The last decade has seen dramatic developments in mainstream U.S. discourses about racism, in large part due to whites' growing awareness of societal systems that disproportionately marginalize people of color. The founding of the now-global Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 marked a shift in public consciousness of the policing of Black bodies and the subsequent violence too often inflicted on them. At the same time, however, a popular competing discourse maintains that race no longer plays a role in the structuring of U.S. society – that is, America is colorblind (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Alongside the stubborn insistence that race is not relevant, despite well-documented evidence that societal institutions are structured to systematically bestow privilege on whiteness (Lipsitz 1998), a third discourse has sprung up: that of "whiteness as disadvantage" (Winant 1997). Proponents of this worldview believe that it is in fact people of color who receive disproportionate privilege, and whites are subjected to discrimination based on ethnicity. In this paper, I analyze the discursive construction of this so-called *reverse racism*, focusing on the euphemization of *cracker* as *the C-word*.

The contested phenomenon of reverse racism was catapulted to center stage in summer 2013, during George Zimmerman's trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin, which was widely covered in the media. On February 26, 2012, Zimmerman, a 28 year-old self-appointed neighborhood watchman in a gated community in Florida, followed, shot, and killed Martin, an unarmed Black 17-year-old walking home from a convenience store with a can of iced tea and a bag of Skittles. Although he had not witnessed Martin commit any crime, Zimmerman profiled

the teenager as "suspicious" and "up to no good" (Baldwin 2012), ignored an emergency dispatcher's instructions to leave Martin alone, and took matters into his own hands – with deadly consequences. Zimmerman was tried for murder in the summer of 2013. His ultimate acquittal sparked widespread public outrage and was a key impetus for the formation of the Black Lives Matter activist movement. Race, in particular Martin's Blackness and Zimmerman's perceived whiteness, played a key role in the widely publicized trial. Zimmerman has a Peruvian mother and a white father, but has a light complexion and was frequently described as white in media coverage, resulting in a popular conception of the altercation as a white vs. Black issue.

The key witness in the trial was a friend of Martin's, an 18-year-old Black woman named Rachel Jeantel. She testified that just before Martin's death, he had told her over the phone that a "creepy-ass cracka" – Zimmerman – was following him. Indeed, as Slobe puts it in her analysis of the role of colorblind ideologies in the trial, there was significant evidence that "Zimmerman was a racist vigilante who had profiled the teenager" (2016:614). Activists protesting against his acquittal pointed to the transcript of his 911 call, where he labeled Martin "real suspicious," because he "looks like he's up to no good or he's on drugs or something" (Baldwin 2012), as evidence of Zimmerman's racially biased assumptions about Martin's criminality. Such assumptions are a form of "professional vision," where Black bodies are positioned as inherently criminal and intensely surveilled by both law enforcement and white civilians (Goodwin 1994).

However, during the trial, the defense attorney claimed that race was not relevant in the Zimmerman-Martin altercation until "Trayvon Martin put race in this" by using the phrase *creepy-ass cracka* (i.e., *cracker*), dismissing the possibility that race was a factor in Zimmerman's civilian policing of Martin's presence in his gated community. The defense team's story directly contradicted the account that Zimmerman racially profiled Martin, arguing instead

that the killing was an act of self-defense. They claimed that it had in fact been Martin who sparked the confrontation that led to his own death. Based on Jeantel's testimony that Martin had used the phrase *creepy-ass cracka* to describe Zimmerman, the defense worked to construct an alternate version of events for that night: one in which Martin, due to his supposedly anti-white attitudes, was in fact the instigating party in the confrontation with Zimmerman. Slobe writes that the defense " attempted to socialize the jury into a specific way of 'hearing' (Duranti 2009) *creepy-ass cracker* as violent language... by placing the term within a post-racial ideological framework; because Martin vocalized Zimmerman's race in labeling him a *cracker*, Martin was the racist and Zimmerman innocently colorblind" (2016:616). Hinging on his reported use of the phrase *creepy-ass cracka*, the defense and the mainstream media effectively painted a picture of Martin as a so-called reverse racist – that is, as harboring racist attitudes towards white people.

This paper outlines a key linguistic strategy that was used in media coverage of the Zimmerman murder trial as part of attempts to construct a narrative of reverse racism: the euphemization of *cracka/er* as *the C-word*, a strategy that I call the *slur-once-removed*. The slur-once-removed is a means of euphemizing slurs that follows the formula *the X-word*, where X is the first letter of the slur. *The C-word* (for *cracker*) had appeared sporadically on the Internet prior to the Trayvon Martin case, but a number of its previous uses were parodic, mocking the use of *the C-word* as ridiculous or unnecessary. In summer 2013, however, it was non-parodically used in a number of high-profile media discussions of the Zimmerman trial. I argue that this delicate treatment recasts Martin's reported use of *cracka* as a racist slur, so offensive that it could not be uttered, unaltered, on the air. The argument over what constitutes proof of racism was taking place not only in the courtroom, but also on the semiotic battleground.

The success of the reading of *the C-word* as *cracker* – and not as its more common referent, *cunt* – relies on an interpretation of *cracker* as an antiwhite slur. It is constructed in relation to the idea of racism against Black people, and relies on structural similarity to *the N-word* (*nigger*). I argue that the appropriation of the discursive material of anti-Black racism in the service of reverse racism is an attempt to imbue the latter argument with legitimacy. Ultimately, euphemizing *cracker* with the slur-once-removed formula works to constitute it as a racial slur equivalent in force to *nigger.*

Despite being broadcast to millions by well-known media figures during the Zimmerman trial, *the C-word* (for *cracker*) did not spread widely into public usage after the trial ended. Nonetheless, even if it was only a blip, this high-profile euphemization of *cracker* laid the foundations for a growing discourse of white victimization. The slur-once-removed construction has become a discursive resource for those who seek to build a narrative of "reverse racism".

Reverse Racism and White Victimhood

Cracker's recent growth as a locus of white anxiety, and many whites' accompanying self-perceptions as victims of racial bias, is fundamentally intertwined with current American discourses of racism. Such discourses subscribe to a "folk theory" of racism as an individual phenomenon, manifested in overt acts of bigotry (Hill 2008:6). This perspective erases the structural nature of racism, instead focusing on debates about whether an individual is or is not a racist (Hodges 2016a, 2016b). In lieu of foregrounding the obvious parallels with patterns of white vigilantism and violence against Black men, the "media firestorm" (Hill 2008:46) that surrounded Zimmerman's trial focused on the question of whether he, as an individual, held racist beliefs. Because there was no evidence that Zimmerman had explicitly noted Martin's

Blackness before hunting him down and killing him, the dominant ideology was able to view him as colorblind and the shooting as unconnected to longstanding societal patterns of racism.

The defense attorney's claim that "it was racial, but it was because Trayvon Martin put race in this" subscribes to the folk theory of racism, according to which race could not have been relevant until it was explicitly invoked by Martin's reported use of the racially associated word *cracka*. The status of *cracka* as a racial slur became vitally important for the defense's interpretation of Martin as a reverse racist. The implied point was that if Martin had held anti-white views, then he was "backward, ignorant, and filled with irrational hatred" (Hill 2008:49). In fact, in a later CNN interview, Rachel Jeantel clarified that Martin had not called Zimmerman a *cracker*, but a *cracka*, which "means a cop or security guard and is not racial in her view" (Bloom 2014:138). But this interpretation, by a person who knew Martin well, was ignored. Because Martin said *cracka*, a word that the defense worked to construct as hateful and violent in and of itself, his death was rationalized and justified by the court of public opinion.

In broader American society, racist dynamics and ideologies are present whether or not they are explicitly referenced, contrary to the debates that raged during the Zimmerman trial. The entrenched economic, political, educational, and linguistic benefits that accrue to middle-class whiteness are well-documented and deliberate (Lipsitz 1998; Tatum 2004). Nevertheless, many Americans – including some people of color – staunchly believe in the existence of "reverse racism", or racism against whites. There is no evidence to support this perception of "whiteness as disadvantage" (Winant 1997); indeed, the ideology of reverse racism "runs counter to or ignores empirically observable racial asymmetries regarding material resources and structural power" (Bucholtz 2011:387). McKinney writes that "most claims that whites are victimized *as whites* rely on false parallels, as they ignore the power differences between whites

and people of color at the group level... While people of color can be prejudiced, just as whites can, they are not socially positioned as a group to be racist; in other words, to use power to put prejudiced attitudes to destructive use" (2005:146, emphasis original). Still, views of whiteness as disadvantage have persisted for well over sixty years.

The dominant colorblind discourse allows whites to claim parity between perceived white victimization and centuries-long racial oppression of people of color. This discourse is based on an ahistorical or even antihistorical perspective, wherein whites believe that people of color who acknowledge the modern-day effects of historical racism are "living in the past" (McKinney 2005:116). In such an ahistoricized context, anti-racist movements are seen by some white people as an attack on whiteness itself. Indeed, the term *racist* has now come to be seen as an injurious slur (Hill 2005:115), "the ultimate insult" for many white people (Tatum 2004:10), an issue to which I return in the conclusion.

In this context of "white fragility" (DiAngelo 2011) in the face of conversations about racism, whites' perception of themselves as victims of racial bigotry is channeled into growing sensitivity around the word *cracker*. Such sensitivity is responsible for the new slur-once-removed *the C-word*, as well as claims that *cracker* is similar to *the N-word* in the harm that it inflicts. This false equivalency is part of a larger discursive shift in the English-speaking world in which "the New Right has quite deliberately used the strategy of redefining and/or appropriating terms originally used by the Left in an attempt to delegitimize issues such as anti-sexism and anti-racism" (Ehrlich and King 1992:153). The appropriation of the slur-once-removed construction to paint a picture of "reverse racism" is thus an interdiscursive, dialogic project.

Dialogicality and stance: Mechanisms of interdiscursivity

Mechanisms of interdiscursivity, specifically dialogic syntax and stance (Du Bois 2007, 2014a), work in tandem to make *the C-word* mean *cracker* and to constitute *cracker* as a racist slur. While dialogic syntax explains the linguistic structure of interdiscursive links, stance theory allows us to identify the "isolable moments" (Agha 2005:1) where interdiscursivity can be seen to take place. In other words, a stance is a unit of interdiscursivity. In this paper, I argue that an interdiscursive analysis sheds light on the continual making and remaking of the pervasive American ideology of so-called reverse racism.

Bauman (2005:146) writes that interdiscursivity "gives us a way of comprehending more extended relations – history – in discourse-based terms", as well as "a vantage point on social formations larger than those of the immediate interaction order". As Butler (1997:36) notes, it is through interdiscursive links that slurs gain their social power to wound: "injurious names have a history... that is invoked and reconsolidated at the moment of utterance". Through interdiscursive repetitions, these histories "congeal" and "give the name its force" (36). Seen through an interdiscursive lens, no utterance is ever fully singular or self-contained; rather, all speech is tied to past meanings, echoes of previous instances of language-in-use. Speakers mobilize these past usages to create new, situated meanings. Such layered meanings also place limits on listeners' potential interpretations: Hill asserts that listeners' "knowledge that some strip of text resembles/parodies/plagiarizes... other strips" (2005:113) constrains possible inferences that can be made about the meaning of an utterance.

Speakers and listeners often mobilize this resemblance between utterances via dialogic syntax, the linguistic macrostructure that emerges "when speakers selectively reproduce aspects of prior utterances, and when recipients recognize the resulting parallelisms and draw inferences from them" (Du Bois 2014a:366). One way that listeners know that two "strips of text" are in

interdiscursive conversation is parallelism, a formal resemblance between utterances. The resonances created by such parallels can recalibrate elements in the social world, giving the impression that they are more – or less – alike. Thus, the parallelism of form between *the C-word* and *the N-word* constructs their referents as similarly damaging slurs on a discursive level.

Perhaps the most easily isolable interdiscursive action arises when a speaker takes a stance, an act in which an individual "simultaneously evaluat[es] objects, position[s] subjects (the self and others), and align[s] with other subjects" (Du Bois 2007:163). Through the act of stancetaking, speakers position themselves within a broader social order: a social matrix of previous stances. When speakers orient to the same stance object across time, they create an interdiscursive stance series. Furthermore, speakers' stances often make explicit reference to a past stance, whether their own or someone else's. Speakers may interdiscursively invoke a stance taken as recently as the preceding turn, or they may comment on an idealized prior text that is accessible to their community of practice. Thus, stance is "the link that takes us from discourse to discourses" (Du Bois 2014b). Through stancetaking, language users are able to mobilize and link past social formations to the current speech situation (Jaffe 2009).

As a public social act, stances tell listeners what type of person the speaker is. A stance places its speaker within what Du Bois (2014b) calls a *stance cohort* – a group of people who take the same stance toward a given stance object. Even individual words come attached to, or index, prior stance cohorts. From a speaker's location within a stance cohort, listeners may infer predictions about their future stances as well. Other members of a stance cohort can be known to both interlocutors (after a speaker takes a stance, a listener might respond, "That sounds just like something your father would say") or unknown but accessible in the realm of stereotype ("You sound like a WASP/a Trump supporter/so French"). In this way, a stance cohort can correspond

to a particular characterological type (Agha 2003) or persona. Such associations with types of persons can allow a listener to infer moral judgments about a stancetaker. On the other hand, stancetakers can also make moral projections about people in oppositionally aligned stance cohorts. Jaffe writes that when taking a stance, speakers "project, assign, propose, constrain, define, or otherwise shape the subject positions of their interlocutors" (2009:8). A single stance can constitute both the stancetaker and other interactionally relevant speakers or interlocutors.

This paper demonstrates that the use of the slur-once-removed construction *the C-word* for *cracker* is a stance, characteristic of a particular stance cohort: those who believe that *cracker* is harmful enough to merit euphemization. This stance simultaneously constitutes an opposing stance cohort, comprised of speakers who do not euphemize *cracker* as *the C-word*. Through the use of the slur-once-removed, the non-euphemizing stance cohort is constructed as using a full-force racial slur (*cracker*) and thus as being reverse racists.

The history of *cracker*

It is impossible to understand the development of *cracker* without looking at the history of *nigger*, since the former has always been in dialogue with the latter. The anti-Black slur was born out of the system of chattel slavery. The term was a linguistic strategy in the centuries-long process of reducing Black people to less-than-human status, in both the economic marketplace and the semiotic one. *Cracker*, on the other hand, has been employed as a form of resistance to that legacy of oppression. While whites, both slaveowners and politicians, used *nigger* to deny human status to Blacks (Kennedy 2002), oppressed people have used *cracker* to mock their oppressors. The white anti-racist commentator Tim Wise (2002) has written that, whereas "the n-word is a term used by whites to dehumanize blacks, to 'put them in their place,'" *cracker* and other purportedly anti-white terms cannot do the same, because "after all, you can't put white

people in their place when they own the place to begin with". Thus, the claim that the power of *cracker* is on par with that of its anti-Black counterpart ignores centuries of historical context.

Indeed, the first known instances of *cracker* do not mention whiteness at all. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reports that its earliest sense, attested as far back as 1509, was that of "a boaster, braggart; hence, a liar." In the late 18th century, the word was used in the United States to describe poor Scots-Irish immigrants to the American South who got their name "from being great boasters" (*OED*). *Cracker* eventually became a self-referential term of honor that is still used today (Ste. Claire 1998). However, the most widely known sense of the term has generalized and now refers to any white person. This sense, which purportedly originated among Black speakers (Ste. Claire 1998), can be either a neutral descriptor or somewhat derogatory.

A widely circulated folk etymology claims that, as a descriptor for whites, *cracker* originated in the sound of slaveowners' whips cracking over the backs of Black slaves (Smitherman 1994:86). Figure 1 shows a definition of *cracker* from UrbanDictionary.com, submitted by the user FigurinOutLife, which reproduces the slaveowner folk etymology. FigurinOutLife uses the phrase *C-word* in the italicized example sentence, but they indicate that they are “still waiting” for *cracker* to be euphemized as a slur-once-removed – implying that it is not at present a common practice. It is also revealing that the user's example sentence includes discussion of the anti-Black slur, revealing that the two are fundamentally in dialogue.

Figure 1: Urban Dictionary user FigurinOutLife's definition of *cracker* (March 24, 2004) (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cracker&defid=575705)

After the Great Migration in the 1930s and 1940s, perhaps under the influence of the slaveowner folk etymology, the use of *cracker* by Blacks in American inner cities came to refer specifically to racist whites (Ste. Claire 1998). Rickford and King point out the relevance of this connotation to the Zimmerman murder trial: "[Martin] did intend *creepy-ass cracker* to be derogatory, we think, complaining to Jeantel that he thought Zimmerman (who was neither a cop nor a security guard, with no obvious warrant for trailing people) was racist, and creepy" (2016:969, fn. 37). They cite Bloom (2014), who reported that the five white jurors on the case were offended by the phrase *creepy-ass cracker*. The defense team capitalized on these jurors' reaction to build up the image of Martin as incontrovertibly anti-white. Rickford and King also underscore the semantic transformation undergone by *cracker*, from referring to a racist individual to being understood as a racist slur itself: "It is ironic that a word used by Blacks to characterize Whites as racist had the opposite effect in the courtroom, being interpreted by White jurors as evidence of the racism of two Black teenagers" (2016:969, fn. 37).

Despite this relatively new interpretation of *cracker* as an offensive anti-white slur, the media's linguistic behavior seldom treats it as such. Whereas its anti-Black counterpart is

frequently censored, *cracker* rarely is. During the trial, CNN hosted a panel debate on Jeantel's quotation of racial slurs during her testimony. The title of one YouTube video of the panel names both *cracker* and the anti-Black slur as "racist words", but uses an asterisk to censor only the latter (https://youtu.be/bkz_-NS2VPE):

(1) N*gger! Cracker!! Explosive CNN Panel Dedicates Whole Show To These Racist Words

Another YouTube video of the same CNN panel employs the slur-once-removed construction for *N-word*, but not for *cracker* (https://youtu.be/HTYR92ObDVI):

(2) This Happened: DEMOCRAT Panel Debates 'N-Word vs. Cracker: Which is Worse?'

Even when other, non-racial taboo words are censored, *cracker* (or *cracka*) is frequently left untouched. During a discussion of Jeantel's testimony on the Reverend Al Sharpton's *PoliticsNation* MSNBC show, the producers "bleeped out" both *nigga* and the intensifier *-ass* but left *cracka* alone (https://youtu.be/UutiGHvwwHg?t=10s):

(3) JEANTEL: I asked him how the man look like. He look like a creepy-BLEEP [ass] cracka... And then – and then he said, BLEEP's [nigga's] still following me now. That BLEEP [nigga] is still following me now.

Furthermore, the YouTube user who uploaded the video in (3) censored the title asymmetrically:

(4) Does Trayvon Using the 'N-Word' Cancel Out His Use Of The "C-Word" ("Creepy-A** Cracker")?

Although the title uses the slur-once-removed *the C-word*, its referent is glossed in parentheses, suggesting both that *cracker* is not on the same order of severity as *nigger*, or even as *-ass*, and that *the C-word* is not immediately interpretable as *cracker*. Ultimately, my point is not to argue

that *cracker* is or is not racist; it is simply to emphasize that as a sign it is a site of contestation. Whether it is censored reflects speakers' differing ideological stances on its offensiveness.

When *cracker* is censored, it reflects the language user's belief that the term is too racially offensive to publicize. But this censorship itself is part of what turns *cracker* into a slur, a process discussed in more detail below. Thus, one strategy for constructing *cracker* as a racist term is to apply the slur-once-removed *X-word* construction to it. Whereas resignification occurs when marginalized speakers reclaim an injurious word and imbue it with positive meaning (Butler 1990), here, the slur-once-removed construction is a kind of reverse resignification – a process of turning a previously mundane or colloquial word into an oppressive slur.

The following examples demonstrate how *cracker* was euphemized as *the C-word* in high-profile media coverage of the Zimmerman trial. The transcript in (5) comes from a Fox News segment by white conservative host Laura Ingraham. The first half is a clip from the Zimmerman trial which was played on Ingraham's show, an exchange between Rachel Jeantel and the defense attorney Don West. The second half is Ingraham's commentary (https://youtu.be/u368FaF6WT0?t=28s).

(5) WEST: You're saying that in the culture that you live in, in your community, um people call – people there call, white .. people .. crackers.

JEANTEL: Yes sir.

WEST: And do they use the N-word .. regularly?

JEANTEL: Yes sir.

<Camera cut back to studio>

INGRAHAM: She went on to say that she didn't think that this was racist. For many non-blacks, this was shocking to hear… Left-wing elites fall all over themselves to avoid

criticizing behavior among black youth that they would never tolerate from most upper-crust white kids. Like the use of the N-word, or the F-word, or the C-word.

Discussing the same section of Jeantel's testimony on his talk show, Al Sharpton also uses the phrase *the C-word* to designate *cracker* (https://youtu.be/UutiGHvwwHg?t=1m37s):

(6) SHARPTON: they could have, uh, possibly uh, the mother of – Trayvon Martin testify about, the language these kids use, the N-word, the C-word,

Sharpton, who is Black, has been criticized by conservatives who claim he holds anti-white views, so perhaps his use of the slur-once-removed formula was part of an effort to seem neutral and balanced. Using the construction for both *cracker* and *nigger* puts them on the same footing, giving the impression that both words represent equally offensive forms of racism. In the following section, I analyze the power of the slur-once-removed construction in greater detail before turning to an examination of how *the C-word* has come to refer to *cracker*.

The slur-once-removed

One discursive move in the construction of *cracker* as an offensive term is to euphemize it alongside other racist slurs. In (5) and (6), euphemization is achieved through the use of the slur-once-removed *X-word* construction, a common, productive, and dynamic linguistic frame that may be applied to almost any English noun. The *N-word* and *the F-word* (*fuck*) are perhaps the two most commonly used X-words, but the possibilities for application of the construction are wide-ranging. For example, according to a Google search, the *D-word* has been used to mean *documentary*, *dick*, *damn*, *depression*, and *divorce*, among others.

The X element does not have to be a single letter. A Minnesota blogger, fearing that snow ("the Sn word") would arrive even in late spring, wrote "sometimes you still get the Sn word in May when you live in the Northland" (Ostrom 2015). Some X-words have multiple possible

referents, as in *the D-word*, mentioned above. Conversely, certain slurs-once-removed are more tightly semiotically linked to their referents than others. *The N-word*, in particular, is very rarely used in any capacity other than as a euphemism for the anti-Black racist slur.

The slur-once-removed frame – *the X-word* – differs from other euphemization strategies in that it relies more on context to be correctly linked to its referent. Other modes of euphemism, such as *c...r* or *c******, maintain additional similarities of form, which aid in interpretation. In the former, the last letter of the word is present; in the latter, the number of asterisks is equal to the number of letters in the referent (here, *cracker*). These formal features help to disambiguate precisely which potential referent is the correct one. The only formal clue present in *the X-word*, on the other hand, is the first letter of the word. The slur-once-removed frame thus has more potential for ambiguity than other euphemization strategies, making discourse context more crucial in decoding the proper referent. In this way, the slur-once-removed is indexical: it is a "pointing finger" that "takes hold of our eyes… and forcibly directs them to a particular object" (Peirce 1933:211). The utterance of any X-word will direct the hearer's attention to whichever word beginning with X letter is appropriate for the discourse context.

The felicitous utterance of a slur-once-removed must occur in an intersubjective space where both speaker and hearer know precisely which word is being referred to. In *The Everyday Language of White Racism*, Hill explains why she spells out the full form of racist epithets: "I am concerned that the moment of collusion between writer and reader when the reader encounters 'k..e' or 'n….r' may be an even more powerful site for the reproduction of racializing practice than is the moment of shock when the reader encounters the words spelled out. With the ellipses, both writer and reader share a false comfort – we are not the sort of people who would ever spell these words out – that is immediately contradicted by what is silenced in a deep presupposition –

we both know these words" (Hill 2008:ix). Like obscuring letters in the middle of an epithet, for a speaker to understand the intended meaning of a slur-once-removed requires "collusion" with their interlocutor. In effect, the speaker makes the recipient "complicit" in the "common sense knowledge" of which word is being used (Whitehead 2009:338).

The slur-once-removed frame is a metalinguistic strategy that allows speakers to mention a taboo word without accepting responsibility for having used it. (Speakers may also use slurs-once-removed for parodic purposes, to humorously or ironically talk about a non-offensive word as if it were a slur or otherwise unmentionable, although this is not the usage I focus on in this paper). However, the construction is not only employed to discuss words that are off-limits. Through the process of creative indexicality (Silverstein 1979), discussed in more detail below, it also bears the power to constitute new taboo words. If the referent is already taboo, the application of the slur-once-removed formula reinforces its tabooness. If it was not previously taboo, the construction bestows taboo status upon it. The above-mentioned Minnesota blogger wrote *the Sn word* as if simply using the word *snow* had the performative power to summon its referent. Speakers may use some slurs-once-removed, then, in order to avoid being seen as invoking the referent itself, whether jokingly or otherwise.

Unlike *the N-word*, *the C-word* has multiple competing referents. It can refer to words as diverse as *cocksucker*, *cuddle*, and *cloning* (*Oxford English Dictionary*). But *cunt* is by far the most frequent referent. This meaning is the top definition on UrbanDictionary.com, displayed in Figure 2, and is popularly used on discussion sites like Yahoo! Answers.

Figure 2 Urban Dictionary user Ollie the Dog's definition of 'C-Word' (November 10, 2005) (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=C-Word&defid=1513379)

Sites where *the C-word* refers to *cracker* are difficult to find unless explicitly searching for the two terms in conjunction. This suggests that this resignification is a new phenomenon, but one which is gaining traction through recent use in popular media (during the Zimmerman trial).

It would seem that the semiotic space of *the C-word* has already been claimed by *cunt*. *Cracker*'s rise in prominence as a possible C-word thus merits further analysis. User-curated websites like Urban Dictionary and Yahoo! Answers have periodically been host to online discussions on the potential slur-once-removed euphemization of *cracker*. Such discussions often take the form of debates or devil's advocate-type questions. The following two Yahoo! Answers inquiries demonstrate metalinguistic awareness about the slur-once-removed construct from 2011, before the widespread media use of *the C-word* during the Zimmerman trial. Both users' posts imply that *cracker* is not presently referred to as *the C-word*, but imply that perhaps it should be.

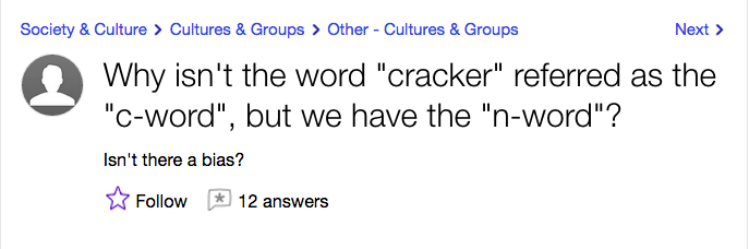

Figure 3 Yahoo! Answers user Spooc's comment (2011)
(http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120704110122AApWSmz)

Figure 4 Yahoo! Answers user Yahoo Answer Angel's comment (2011)
(http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120605150237AAApim3)

The first-person plural pronoun *we* employed by both users – "we have the 'n-word'" and "we have to use the 'N word'" – is telling. By including themselves in the group of people who "have to use the N-word," they simultaneously position themselves as white and oppositionally juxtapose themselves with Black people. The pronoun aligns the reader with the author, precluding the possibility that the reader is among the group of "blacks" about whom Yahoo Answer Angel is complaining. Furthermore, both users write in a language of victimhood ("we have to use the 'N word'", "poor Gwenneth [sic] Paltrow"), implying that they are forced to euphemize against their will. In addition, although the "C-word" and the "H-word" are glossed in parentheses, neither user glosses "the N-word." This signifies that *the C-word* (as well as the "H-word") is still a site of possibility – a not-yet-fully-determined semiotic field. The glossing indicates these (presumably white) users' active construction of a semiotic link between *the C-word* and *cracker*. However, it also undermines their argument to some degree. If *the C-word* were as saliently linked to *cracker* as *the N-word* is linked to its referent, there would be no need to gloss it in the first place.

***Cracker*, stance cohorts, and the making of "reverse racism"**

Given that the most salient referent of *the C-word* for many speakers of American English is *cunt*, and not *cracker*, it is a question of some theoretical import how the latter comes to be referenced by the phrase *the C-word*. I argue that the felicitous application of *the C-word* to *cracker* relies on interdiscursive links to other utterances of the slur-once-removed construction across space and time. In Laura Ingraham's commentary on the Trayvon Martin case, cited above in (5), her intertextual engagement with a clip of the Zimmerman trial wherein *cracker* was the topic of discussion shows that this use of *the C-word* indexes *cracker*.

The intended interpretation of this indexical link relies on formal parallelism, a key element of the theory of dialogic syntax. The success of the reading of *the C-word* as *cracker*, and not as *cunt*, depends on its obvious structural and semantic similarity with *the N-word* to trigger the "recognition of analogical affinities" between them (Du Bois 2014a:370). In instances where a slur-once-removed has multiple possible referents, analogy between parallel forms "can be deployed... as part of a cognitive process of interpreting its meaning" (2014a:383). In particular, then, listeners' understanding that *the C-word* here refers to *cracker* becomes possible precisely through juxtaposition with Ingraham's (and West's) use of *the N-word*, which makes it clear to the audience that racial slurs, and not gendered ones such as *cunt*, are the topic of discussion. In short, the reason that Ingraham's viewers are able to interpret the intended referent of her use of *the C-word* as *cracker*, instead of the more common *cunt*, is their awareness that it "resembles/parodies" (Hill 2005:113) the link between *the N-word* and its referent.

The parallelism between the X-words creates resonance, a "catalytic" property of interaction that has the ability to "dynamically reshap[e] the significance of elements in a dialogic exchange" (Du Bois 2014a:373). In this case, I argue that the resonance generated by the structural parallelism of *the N-word* and *the C-word* is responsible for the creation of a "new

affinit[y]" between *nigger* and *cracker*. Since "structural parallels invite functional inferences" (Du Bois 2014a:366), by extension, the generation of an affinity between the racial slurs used for Black people and those for white people also creates an affinity between the two groups' experiences of racial abuse. Its juxtaposition with anti-Black racism makes perceived prejudice against white people seem more legitimate and more real. Ultimately, this resonance promotes a kind of equivalency effect between societal racism against Black people and individual bias against whites. The equivalency is merely discursive, however, and is not borne out given dramatically unequal material conditions of Black and white life in American society (Lipsitz 1998). Nonetheless, discourses can have far-reaching effects on speakers' perceptions of the social world, including their understandings of what constitutes and does not constitute racism.

In a non-parodic context such as Ingraham's news show, to apply the slur-once-removed construction to *cracker* is effectively to call *cracker* a slur. Moreover, "to call a speaker's word a slur is in itself a charge of racism" (Hill 2008:49). Therefore, the substitution of *the C-word* for *cracker* is a charge of racism: it serves to discursively construct *cracker* as racist, which in turn constructs prejudice against whites as racism. Here, Silverstein's (1979) distinction between presupposing indexicality and creative indexicality comes into play. While presupposing indexicality acknowledges social facts that already exist, anchoring utterances in social reality, creative indexicality points to an emergent reality that to a certain extent comes into being through language use. Similarly, Du Bois writes that "[d]ialogicality is at once retrospective and prospective, evoking interpretive links to prior utterances" - that is, *presupposing* prior utterances - "while creating new affordances for meaning in the next utterance" (2014a:364). Indexicality and dialogicality are two sides of the same coin: both theories recognize that the effects of language use are projected into the future beyond the bounds of the immediate speech event.

Likewise, the repeated euphemization of *cracker* as *the C-word* "accretes," gradually building up a social reality where *cracker* is seen as a word that is offensive enough to be censored (Du Bois 2002; Rauniomaa 2003). Because *the N-word* is the most salient exemplar of the category of racial slurs-once-removed, it is always indexed by utterances in which *the C-word* means *cracker*, whether or not the speaker overtly makes reference to this term. Listeners' understanding that *the C-word* refers to *cracker* depends on an interdiscursive link between the discourse of anti-Black racism and the discourse of imagined anti-white racism. Tying the two discourses together is the iconic resemblance of the forms *the N-word* and *the C-word*, and their accompanying semantic parallelism. The creative power of this link is that it situates *nigger* and *cracker* on equal footing, as if they bore the same power to wound. Their structural similarity as members of a category of epithets is pushed to the fore, while simultaneously backgrounding the enormous difference in harm that has historically accompanied the former but not the latter. Future utterances of *the C-word* then mobilize past usages, anchoring the new slur-once-removed in the previously constructed social reality that is necessary for its interpretive success. In this way, the application of the *X-word* construction to *cracker* is part of a dynamic, dialogic process. Through a series of discrete but interconnected speech events, speakers take stances that create the social reality in which future speakers can anchor their own use of *the C-word*.

Alongside dialogic parallelism between utterances, interdiscursive links become salient when speakers across speech situations take stances about the same stance object. Stances can reveal what type of moral person a speaker is because they align their speaker with a stance cohort: a group of stancetakers who evaluate – and thereby constitute – a shared stance object in similar ways. Stancetaking is therefore a "category-bound activity" (Sacks 1972; Whitehead 2009): only those who believe in reverse racism use *the C-word* to mean *cracker* non-ironically.

When speakers like Ingraham and Sharpton use the phrase *the C-word* to mean *cracker*, as in (5) and (6), they take a stance that *cracker* is an injurious slur, too harmful to mention explicitly on television. These utterances locate their speakers within a stance cohort of euphemizers, a social action attached to moral implications about the stancetakers' views on (reverse) racism.

Figure 6 shows a stance triangle (Du Bois 2007) in which two stance cohorts evaluate the same shared stance object: the practice of saying (or not saying) the word *cracker*. One cohort consists of euphemizers, such as Ingraham and Sharpton, whose evaluative practice is to use the slur-once-removed *the C-word*. And there are non-euphemizers, whose practice is to simply say *cracker*. By using or not using *the C-word*, speakers take a stance on whether saying *cracker* is itself racist. Those who choose to euphemize evaluate *cracker* as a racist term, whereas the non-euphemizers evaluate *cracker* as not racist – or at least not racist enough to merit euphemization.

The stance triangle demonstrates that stances are always taken in alignment with or opposition to other stance cohorts. The euphemizers' stance on *cracker* is fundamentally oppositional: they claim to be opposed to reverse racism. However, this position begs the question of who, precisely, they position themselves in opposition to. The effect of the euphemizers' stance is to point up a structural gap in the stance triangle: who is the opposing stance cohort? In this case, I argue that the euphemizers' stance is responsible for the constitution of a rival stance cohort of "reverse racists." In this way, the use of *the C-word* accomplishes a number of social actions. It places its users within a stance cohort of euphemizers, contrasts that

cohort with non-euphemizers, and constructs the latter group as anti-white racists.

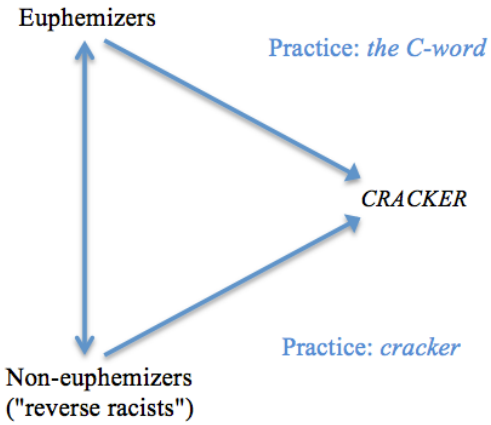

Figure 6 Stance triangle: *Cracker*

When Trayvon Martin referred to George Zimmerman a *creepy-ass cracka*, he took a particular stance on Zimmerman. Regardless of his actual intent in doing so, by taking this stance, Martin activated his membership in the stance cohort of people who say *cracka/er*. In the view of some of the media and the public, he thereby placed himself in a cohort of anti-white reverse racists – which in the public's mind justified Zimmerman's assault on him (or at least gave credence to Zimmerman's story that Martin attacked him unprovoked). Though stancetaking is a discursive move, it has consequential effects in the social and political world.

Bucholtz (2009) has called for the study of stance "to consider not only the interactional subjectivities of interlocutors but also the more enduring subject positions and social categories they take up or have thrust upon them" (166). This paper answers this call, by demonstrating one way that stance cohorts construct the "more enduring subject position" of reverse racism.

Conclusion

In this paper I have defined the slur-once-removed as a construction that has the power to create slurs, through a process of reverse resignification. I have argued that the euphemization of *cracker* as *the C-word* mobilizes authority from a dialogically accessible stance cohort to

construct *cracker* as a racist slur – equally racist as *nigger*. This instantiation of the slur-once-removed construction works in the service of the project of reverse racism, using language to indexically create a narrative of antiwhiteness as on par with anti-Blackness. Arguably, the parity that is created through the dialogic construction of *the C-word* as equivalent to *the N-word* is a form of denial of the systematic racial privilege from which white Americans benefit.

Although the debate over *cracker* as an anti-white slur was hyper-relevant in the summer of 2013 during the Zimmerman trial, its slur-once-removed euphemization *the C-word* has not since been diffused into widespread public usage. As Agha notes, "the 'uptake' of such [mass media] messages by audiences involves processes of evaluative response that permit many degrees of freedom" (2003:242). In this case, broad audiences presumably had a particular "evaluative response" that failed to determine that *cracker* should be euphemized as *the C-word*.

In explaining why this instance of the slur-once-removed did not take root as a common cultural practice, we must consider what people already know about race in American society. For many, it is evident that the histories of Black and white racial life in America are not equivalent. So while supposed anti-white bias and structural anti-Black racism were discursively put on equal footing, many people are familiar with the dramatic difference in the histories of the two words. Discourse can do quite a lot to shape the social order, but it cannot do everything. For a new discursive move to be effective, it must match up with listeners' perceptions of the broader social world. If not backed by material equivalency, discourse equivalencies of this kind can come across as unwarranted or overdramatic.

Writing about how signs become intelligible to a community of speakers, Agha notes that "the existence of the word as something usable in utterances presupposes a collective understanding of its existence. The difficulty..., however, is the question of how such a collective

understanding itself comes about. How, then, does a social regularity of recognition emerge?" (2003:245). What *the C-word* demonstrates is that sometimes "a social regularity of recognition" of a new form-meaning pairing does not emerge, at least not on a society-wide scale. As I have shown, there are moments when speakers actively attempt to construct a new semiotic link, but the "collective understanding" necessary for widespread uptake never occurs. In these cases, the new pairing quickly falls out of usage or never enters into mainstream usage in the first place.

However, even though *the C-word* did not come to unproblematically mean *cracker* for most members of American society, the slur-once-removed construction itself has a much broader life. In recent years, it has been extended to other words which often apply to white people, such as *racist*. In Bloom's analysis of the Zimmerman murder trial, she details how the prosecutor worked to keep any mention of racism off the table to avoid giving the impression that the killing of Trayvon Martin had anything to do with his Blackness: the judge said that "the word 'profiling' – but not the phrase 'racial profiling' – could be used in opening statements... *initially the 'r' word [racism] was off limits, as if its very mention would blow the roof right off the courthouse*" (Bloom 2014:77, emphasis added). During the controversial 2016 Presidential election, as well, *racist* was frequently euphemized as *the R-word*. To take one example, a *Politico* article entitled "Trump and Clinton Hurl the R-word" discusses Hillary Clinton's campaign-trail allegations of Donald Trump's racism (Debenedetti and Nelson 2016). I see this instance of the slur-once-removed as working hand in hand with *the C-word* as part of the project of reverse racism. To turn *racist* into a slur means that it may become even more difficult to have discussions about oppression without the perceptions of white victimhood that can accompany even the most objective acknowledgement of structural racism. This new phenomenon was in part made possible by past high-profile uses of *cracker* as *the C-word*, which helped to create the

social reality in which *racist* is seen as offensive enough to euphemize. Thus, even though *the C-word* itself did not take off, it further publicized the slur-once-removed mechanism for future use by speakers working toward the same ideological and discursive projects.

Lipsitz writes that "[r]ace is a cultural construct, but one with deadly social causes and consequences" (2006:2). Trayvon Martin was constructed as a reverse racist on the semiotic level, but this led to a very real injustice when it was used to excuse his death at the hands of George Zimmerman. Likewise, although the slur-once-removed is a discursive tool, it has consequential material effects. The construction has the power to create slurs, which, through the constitutive power of stance cohorts, fashions (reverse) racists out of speakers who use them.

When the slur-once-removed is employed, it functions to avoid reanimating the "voices" of those who originally aimed to wound people with that slur – and the violence, both discursive and physical, that went with them. What *the C-word* does, then, is animate voices that never really existed in the first place, voices from an imagined American history of racial subordination against whites.

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