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"The C-Word" Meets "the N-Word": The Slur-Once-Removed and the Discursive Construction of "Reverse Racism"

This article examines one strategy in the discursive construction of so-called reverse racism: the slur-once-removed, *a linguistic construction in the form* the X-word, *used to euphemize slurs. Building on structural similarity to* the N-word, the C-word *has emerged as a euphemism for* cracker. *Using dialogic syntax and stance theory, the article analyzes media debates surrounding the George Zimmerman murder trial to argue that the parallelism of form between* the C-word *and* the N-word *constructs their referents as similarly harmful. Euphemizing* cracker *as* the C-word *indexes* cracker *as a racist slur, and by extension discursively constructs the phenomenon of reverse racism.* [euphemism, interdiscursivity, racism, stance, whiteness]

Introduction

The last decade has seen dramatic developments in mainstream U.S. discourses about racism, in large part as a result of efforts by activists of color to educate the public about societal systems that disproportionately oppress people of color. The founding of the now-global Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 marked a shift in (white) public consciousness of the policing of Black bodies and the subsequent violence too often inflicted on them.[1] 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 color-blind (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Despite well-documented evidence that societal institutions are structured to systematically bestow privilege on whiteness (Lipsitz 1998), and alongside this stubborn insistence that race is not relevant, a third discourse has sprung up on the political right: 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 that whites today are subjected to the brunt of racial discrimination (King 2015). In this article, I analyze the discursive construction of this so-called reverse racism, focusing specifically on the euphemization of the racial label *cracker* as *the C-word*.

The contested phenomenon of reverse racism was catapulted to center stage in summer 2013 during George Zimmerman's widely covered trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin, which has since been the subject of numerous analyses by linguists

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and linguistic anthropologists (Hodges 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Rickford 2013, 2016; Rickford and King 2013, 2016; Slobe 2016; Sullivan 2016). On February 26, 2012, Zimmerman, a 28-year-old self-appointed neighborhood watchman in a gated community in Sanford, 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 candy. Although he had not witnessed Martin commit any crime, Zimmerman reported the teenager to 911, ignored the emergency dispatcher's instructions to leave Martin alone, and took matters into his own hands—with deadly consequences. Zimmerman was tried for murder in summer 2013. His ultimate acquittal sparked widespread public outrage and was a catalyst for the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement. Race, in particular Martin's Blackness and Zimmerman's perceived whiteness, played a pivotal 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 Zimmerman-Martin altercation as a white vs. Black issue).

The key witness in the trial was a friend of Martin's, an 18-year-old Black teenager named Rachel Jeantel. She testified that just before Martin's death, he 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 color-blind 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 unfounded, racially biased assumptions about Martin's criminality. Such assumptions are a form of "professional vision" (Goodwin 1994), according to which Black bodies are positioned as inherently criminal and are intensely surveilled by both law enforcement and white civilians.

However, during the trial, defense attorney Don West claimed that race was not relevant in the Zimmerman-Martin altercation until "Trayvon Martin put race in this" by using the phrase *creepy-ass cracker* (WFTV 2013), dismissing the possibility that race was a factor in Zimmerman's civilian policing of Martin's presence in his neighborhood. The defense team's story directly contradicted the account that Zimmerman racially profiled Martin, invoking Florida's Stand Your Ground law to argue 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:

> Attorney Don West attempted to socialize the jury into a specific way of "hearing" (Duranti 2009) *creepy-ass cracker*[2] as violent language. This is achieved 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 reverse racist—that is, as harboring racist attitudes toward white people.

This article 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, the term was nonparodically 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. Thus the argument over what constituted proof of racism took place not only in the courtroom, but also on the semiotic battleground.

This element of the white-supremacist project of reverse racism is deeply dialogic (Bakhtin 1981[1975]; Voloshinov 1973[1929]). 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 unspeakable anti-white slur. It is constructed in relation to the idea of racism against Black people, and relies on structural similarity to *the N-word* (*nigger*).[3] 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*, a term widely perceived as the most offensive in the English language.

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

The data I analyze below come from a corpus of television shows and online discussions that I collected using Hill's "Google intertextuality" method (2005:123), using the search terms *the C-word* and *cracker* in conjunction. The television data are drawn from news shows across the political spectrum, on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. Many of these shows recontextualize parts of the videotaped Zimmerman trial, which was widely available on the video-sharing website YouTube. Internet data were collected from websites that feature user-generated content, such as YouTube, Urban Dictionary, Quora, and Yahoo! Answers.[4] Users of these sites regularly put forth conflicting definitions and interpretations of words and phrases, often engaging in heated debate with one another about what these words or phrases "really" mean. On such sites, the metapragmatic contestation of semantic and semiotic meaning is made visible.

I begin this article by briefly introducing the social context in which discourses of white victimization have arisen. I then outline the theoretical foundations of my interdiscursive analysis, dialogic syntax and stance, before discussing the history of *cracker* and the creatively indexical power of the slur-once-removed construction. Finally, I argue that the euphemization of *cracker* as *the C-word* instantiates the broader discursive construction of "reverse racism," and conclude with a discussion of the reasons that this euphemization has failed to diffuse into common usage.

Reverse Racism and White Victimhood

Cracker's 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" that sees modern racism as an individual phenomenon, manifested in deliberate, overt acts of bigotry (Hill 2008:6). This perspective erases the structural component of racism, instead focusing attention on debates about whether an individual is or is not a racist, what Hodges has called the "hunting for 'racists'" language game (2016a, 2016b). He notes that this type of discourse turned the question of George Zimmerman's racial profiling of Trayvon Martin into a "binary debate . . . that fail[ed] to account for the myriad ways race and racism factored into the incident" (2016b:28). Instead of foregrounding the obvious parallels with patterns of white vigilantism and violence against Black men, media coverage of 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 remarked on Martin's Blackness before hunting him down and killing him, the dominant ideology was able to frame him as color-blind and the shooting as unconnected to long-standing societal patterns of racism (Hodges 2016a, 2016b).

In part because Zimmerman could be interpellated as white, the defense was able to invoke the stereotypical crime frame of "Black-on-white violence" to bolster their account that Martin was the aggressor. Indeed, when Zimmerman was exonerated, many commentators made the argument that it was Martin's racial views, not Zimmerman's, which were relevant to their confrontation. 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 CNN interview, Rachel Jeantel later 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.

Contrary to the debates that raged during the Zimmerman trial, in broader American society, racist dynamics and ideologies are present whether or not they are explicitly referenced. American society is composed of institutions that "centrally embed and constantly reproduc[e] the interests, privileges, and values of white Americans" (Feagin 2005:xii), although many white people do not recognize the extent to which this centering of whiteness occurs. 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. The evidence to support this perception of "whiteness as disadvantage" is highly suspect (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, original emphasis). The "false parallels" that McKinney mentions minimize the historical and present-day exploitation of people of color—which has pronounced and tangible effects—by equating systemic racism to an imagined specter of white persecution.

Still, the assertion that whiteness is a disadvantage is both an old one, dating back at least to the post–Civil War Reconstruction era, and a persistent one. Blee's study of American white supremacist groups has shown that allegations of white victimhood, particularly the supposed racial and gendered persecution of white women, helped fuel the growth of the original Ku Klux Klan during the 1870s (Blee 2009[1991]:13). Reverse-racist victim narratives also play a crucial role for women members of the diverse racist hate groups that exist in the 21st century, such as neo-Nazis and the modern KKK (Blee 2002:57 and 80–83). However, such views are not only found among extremists. Mainstream white society is also permeated with vague notions of white disadvantage, as seen in arguments that practices ranging from bilingual education to affirmative action are somehow unfair to whites (Winant 1997).

The perception of white victimhood did not develop in a vacuum. Rather, this narrative has been advanced as a reaction to historical gains in the direction of more equality for people of color (Brooks, Ebert, and Flockhart 2017). The first citation of the phrase *reverse racism* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from a 1950

Washington Post article. According to a search of the Google Books database (Michel et al. 2010), which catalogs millions of books and magazines published since 1800, the phrase has seen a steady climb in frequency since in 1965, the year that the Voting Rights Act extended civil rights to Black Americans and other Americans of color. Bloom reports that during the early 1960s, when segregation and Jim Crow laws were still in effect, "a majority of whites believed that blacks and whites had equal opportunity in employment and education" (2014:207). If during the era of overtly racist Jim Crow policies, whites thought that Black people received equal treatment, some would have no doubt seen the push for legally enshrined civil rights and voting rights, as well as institutional affirmative action policies, as tipping the balance unfairly in favor of Black people and other people of color. This view is still common today: a recent social psychology study, the findings of which went viral, showed that whites tend to see any gain in equality by Black people as a "zero-sum game," a net loss for white communities (Norton and Sommers 2011). Whites surveyed in the study indicated their belief that white Americans today face significantly more discrimination than Black Americans. Even among liberal whites, complaints of white disadvantage at the hands of anti-racist movements like Black Lives Matter can function as a denial of white privilege (DiAngelo 2011:64).

The dominant color-blind discourse institutes a "cultivated un-thinking on matters of 'race'" (Feagin 2005:xiv), which allows whites to claim parity between perceived white victimization and the centuries-long racial oppression of people of color. This "un-thinking" is based on an ahistorical or even antihistorical perspective, wherein whites argue 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, antiracist movements that strive to end oppression against people of color have come to be seen by many whites as an attack on whiteness itself. Individuals and institutions who act against white racism—for instance, by implementing affirmative action policies—are frequently subject to "white backlash" (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). For many whites, simply acknowledging the history of white racism is seen as an anti-white act. Indeed, the term *racist* has now come to be seen as an injurious slur itself (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 partially 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 on its targets.[5] This false equivalency is part of a larger, ongoing 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. In the next section, I outline the theoretical background that informs this analysis.

Dialogicality and Stance: Mechanisms of Interdiscursivity

To understand how slurs come to carry social meaning, I rely on the theories of dialogic syntax and stance, which I argue are both concrete mechanisms of interdiscursivity. These processes work in tandem both to make *the C-word* mean *cracker* and to constitute *cracker* as a racist slur. This section introduces key elements of the two theories, which will be elaborated on in a later section.

Bauman notes that an interdiscursive perspective "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" (2005:146). It is through interdiscursive repetition that slurs gain their social power to wound, according to Butler, who writes that "injurious names have a history . . . that is invoked and reconsolidated at the moment of utterance" (1997:36). Seen through an interdiscursive lens, no utterance is ever fully singular or self-contained; rather, all speech is tied to past meanings and voices, echoes of previous instances of language-in-use (Bakhtin 1981[1975]; Voloshinov 1973[1929]). 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.

To analyze the way that speakers and listeners mobilize perceived resemblances between utterances, I deploy the theory of dialogic syntax, which accounts for 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 with one another is parallelism, a formal resemblance between utterances. The new resonances created by such parallels can recalibrate elements in the social world, giving the impression that they are analogous in some way. Thus, the parallelism of form between *the C-word* and *the N-word* constructs their referents as similarly damaging slurs on a discursive level, a point to which I return below.

Perhaps the most easily isolable interdiscursive action comes when a speaker takes a stance, or "tak[es] up a position with respect to the form or the content of one's utterance" (Jaffe 2007:3). When a speaker takes a stance, they "simultaneously evaluat[e] objects, position subjects (the self and others), and align with other subjects" (Du Bois 2007:163). Through the act of stancetaking speakers position themselves within a broader social order: namely, an extant social matrix of previous stances. Stancetakers may engage with, disagree with, or comment on these past 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 a prior text or discourse that is broadly accessible to a community of practice to which they belong. Thus, stance is "the link that takes us from discourse to discourses" (Du Bois 2014b), because it is "centrally implicated in the creation of intertextual and interdiscursive links" (Jaffe 2009:20). Through stancetaking, language users are able to mobilize and connect past social formations to the current speech situation.

As a public social act, stances tell listeners what type of person the speaker is. A stance positions 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. Stance cohorts are comprised of what Butler calls "an inherited set of voices, an echo of others who speak as the 'I'" (1997:25). Even individual words come attached to, or index, prior stances and stance cohorts. As with other types of semiotic resources in a complex indexical field (Eckert 2008), however, the same word or phrase may be used by multiple stance cohorts for different purposes. That is, while discrete stance cohorts may engage in apparently identical stancetaking practices (i.e., through use of the "same" word), the discursive functions accomplished by those practices are distinct. Consider the labels *patriot*, *liberal*, *traditional*, *queer*: in the mouths of different speakers, these words do different work. They can all be either derogatory or laudatory, depending on the stance the speaker intends to project. To determine precisely which stance cohort a speaker belongs to, then, it is necessary to consider that speaker's history of stancetaking. That is, the larger stance matrix—what is already known about stances the speaker has previously taken or aligned with—delimits the relevant context and constrains possible interpretations of the meaning of

individual stances (Jaffe 2009:19). Once a speaker is located within a stance cohort, listeners may make predictions about their future stances as well (Kockelman 2012: E107). Of course, a speaker's membership within a particular stance cohort need not be fixed or immutable. Rather, speakers may move between different stance cohorts depending on context, in order to perform diverse aspects of their identity with various interlocutors or to strategically engage in particular discourses or rhetorics.

Other members of a stance cohort can be personally 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/like 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 thus constitute both the stancetaker and other interactionally relevant speakers or interlocutors.

The remainder of this article argues that the use of the slur-once-removed construction *the C-word* for *cracker* is a stance that is characteristic of a particular stance cohort: those who take up the position that *cracker* is harmful enough to merit euphemization. This metalinguistic stance simultaneously constitutes an opposing stance cohort comprising speakers who do not euphemize *cracker* as *the C-word*. The use of the slur-once-removed constructs the non-euphemizing stance cohort 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 discourses about the former have always been parasitic on discourses about the latter. The anti-Black slur was born out of the system of chattel slavery (Kennedy 2002). The term was a linguistic strategy in the centuries-long process of reducing Black people to less-than-human status, both on the economic marketplace and the symbolic 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 Blacks have used *cracker* to mock their oppressors. The white antiracist 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, to claim that the "injurious" power of *cracker* is on par with that of its anti-Black counterpart is to ignore centuries of historical context (Butler 1997:2).

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" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, June 27, 1766). According to Ste. Claire's history of Florida cracker culture (1998), *cracker* became a self-referential term of honor that is still used today by the local white population. 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 term for whites, *cracker* originated in the sound of slaveowners' whips cracking over the backs of enslaved

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

Black people (Smitherman 1994:86). This etymology is referenced in Figure 1, which shows a user-generated definition of *cracker* from UrbanDictionary.com, published by the user FigurinOutLife in 2004. Underneath the plain-text definition is an italicized example sentence, also submitted by the user, although in this case it is more a commentary on the word than a true example of its usage. While FigurinOutLife uses the phrase *C-word* in the italicized example sentence, they indicate that they are "still waiting" for *cracker* to be euphemized with the slur-once-removed formula—implying that it is not at present a common practice. It is also revealing that the user's example sentence is not an example of *cracker* in usage as a reference to a white person, but rather a metalinguistic commentary on racialized euphemization practices. Furthermore, the example includes discussion of the anti-Black slur, revealing that the two are constructed as being fundamentally in dialogue with one another.

Perhaps under the influence of the slaveowner folk etymology, after the Great Migration in the 1930s and 1940s, 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 George 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 Zimmerman 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 in its title 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, nonracial 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* audible (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 this video of Sharpton's show 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 euphemized, it reflects the language user's position that the term is too racially offensive to publicize. But this censorship itself is part of what turns *cracker* into a slur. Thus, one strategy for constructing *cracker* as a racist term is to apply the slur-once-removed *X-word* construction to it. Whereas for Butler (1990), resignification occurs when marginalized speakers reclaim an injurious word and imbue it with positive meaning, 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 run 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 defense attorney Don West. The second half is Ingraham's commentary (https://youtu.be/u368FaF6WT0?t=38s).

(5) <Clip from courtroom testimony>
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.
<51 seconds excluded from transcript>
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 used 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, a Black civil rights activist, has been criticized by conservatives who claim he holds anti-white views, so it is possible that his use of the slur-once-removed formula was part of an effort to ward off criticism by seeming neutral and balanced. I compare the differences between Sharpton's and Ingraham's on-air uses of *the C-word* below.

During coverage of the Zimmerman trial, *the C-word* was also used in at least one instance to euphemize *cracker* for purposes of mockery or sarcasm. In the magazine *The New Republic*, linguist John McWhorter published a piece titled "A New 'C-Word'?: The ludicrous debate over the word 'cracker'" (2013). The article asks, "Was it wrong for [Trayvon] Martin to use 'the C-word' (notice how goofy it even seems to euphemize it as such)?", before going on to dismiss attempts to draw an equivalency between *nigger* and *cracker*. McWhorter's usage of *the C-word* clearly differs from that of Ingraham and Sharpton. As demonstrated by his calling the slur-once-removed "ludicrous" and "goofy," he employs it in order to ridicule or delegitimize it. As McWhorter implicitly points out through his mockery, using the slur-once-removed construction for both *cracker* and *nigger* would put 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 as used nonparodically by Ingraham and Sharpton in greater detail before turning to an examination of how *the C-word* has come to refer to *cracker*, albeit partially and unevenly.

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) above, 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 noun. The slur-once-removed relies on the conventions of English orthography. The *N-word* and *the F-word* (*fuck*, or sometimes *fag(got)*) are perhaps the two most commonly used X-words, but the possibilities for application of the frame are wide-ranging. For example, according to a Google search, the *D-word* has been used to mean *documentary*, *dick*, and *divorce*, among others. Linguists and linguistic anthropologists use the frame as well, as with Geoffrey Nunberg's book *Ascent of the A-Word: Assholism, The First Sixty Years* (2012) and the "Drop the I-Word" campaign against the use of the phrase *illegal immigrant* (https://www.raceforward.org/practice/tools/drop-i-word-campaign).

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). Neither does it have to be a letter in the Roman alphabet: several years ago, as undergraduate linguistics majors, my friends and I referred to our dreaded senior theses as *the theta-word*. 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.[6]

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 corresponds 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(s) 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[1885]:211). The utterance of any X-word will direct the hearer's attention to whichever word beginning with the specified letter is appropriate for the discourse context.

To be felicitous, the utterance of a slur-once-removed must occur in an intersubjective space where both speaker and hearer know precisely which word is being indexed. In the introduction to *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. (As noted above, speakers may also use slurs-once-removed for parodic purposes, to humorously or ironically talk about a nonoffensive word as if it were a slur or otherwise

unmentionable). However, the construction is not only employed to discuss words that are already off-limits. Through the process of creative indexicality (Silverstein 1979), discussed in more detail below, the slur-once-removed also bears the power to constitute new taboo words. If the referent is already taboo, the application of the slur-once-removed frame reinforces its taboo nature. If it was not previously taboo, the construction may bestow taboo status upon it.

The origin of *the X-word* construction itself is obscure. To trace the emergence of two specific slurs-once-removed, *the N-word* and *the C-word*, I used Google's Ngram viewer, a tool which tracks the frequency of phrases across the entire Google Books database (Michel et al. 2010). The x-axis graphs time, and the y-axis represents the search term's frequency as a percentage of all two-word phrases in the database. As graphed in Figure 2, the first attested use of the phrase *the N-word* in Google Books occurred in 1959. It saw an uptick in frequency in 1967, during the Civil Rights movement, whose concern with racial justice perhaps spurred the euphemization of racial slurs. Its use spiked in 1995, the year of the widely publicized O. J. Simpson murder trial, because one of the lawyers in that case was quoted in a *New York Times* article using the phrase *the N-word* (Noble 1995). It steadily rose in frequency between 2003 and 2008, the end of the data range. The frequency of *the C-word* is also shown in the figure, but any comparison of *the N-word* and *the C-word* is inaccurate because so many of the tokens refer to other C-words, while it is likely that most tokens of *the N-word* refer to the anti-Black slur. Nevertheless, *the C-word* in all uses is significantly less frequent than *the N-word* in all uses.

Unlike *the N-word*, *the C-word* has multiple competing referents. It can refer to words as diverse as *cocksucker* (humorously referenced in the italicized example sentence in Figure 3), *cuddle* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, January 17, 1985), and *cloning* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, February 28, 2004). "The C Word" is even the title of a TV movie from 2015 about a British blogger's fight with cancer. But *cunt* is by far the most frequent referent. This meaning is the top definition on UrbanDictionary.com, displayed in Figure 3, and is widely used on discussion sites like Yahoo! Answers, shown in (7) (http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20121210030414AA6lGmN):

(7) Which word is more offensive out of the 'n word' or 'c word'? As in the word used for african americans or the word used for female genitals (but i [sic] have never actually heard anyone use it in that way)

Sites where *the C-word* refers to *cracker* are difficult to find unless one explicitly searches for the two terms in conjunction.[7] This suggests that this resignification is a new phenomenon that is gaining exposure through recent use in popular media during the Zimmerman trial.

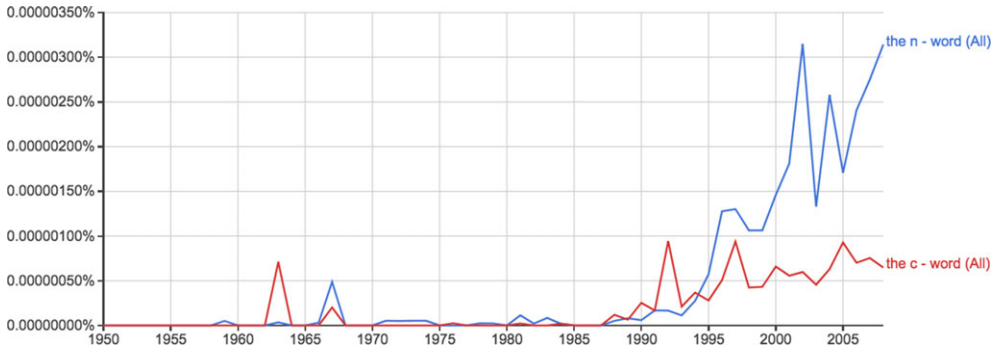

Figure 2. Frequency of *the N-word* and *the C-word* in Google Books

Figure 3. 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)

Because the semiotic space of *the C-word* has seemingly 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 examples from Yahoo! Answers demonstrate users' metapragmatic awareness about the slur-once-removed construct. The two users' posts imply that *cracker* is not currently referred to as *the C-word*, but imply that perhaps it should be. Both questions were posed in 2011, demonstrating that the metalinguistic demand for the euphemization of *cracker* predates the 2013 coverage of the Trayvon Martin murder case. These and other online discussions helped to set the stage for the use of *the C-word* during media reports of Zimmerman's trial two years later.

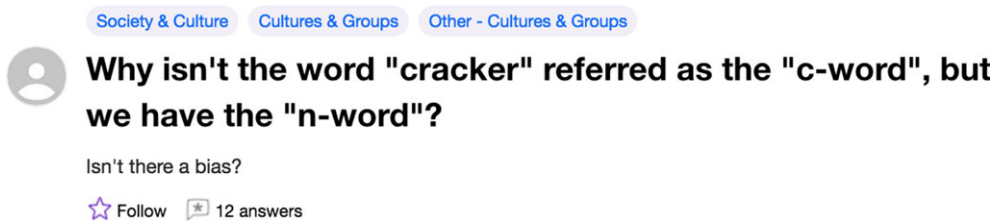

Figure 4. Yahoo! Answers user Spooc's comment (2011) (http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120704110122AApWSmz)

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," the users simultaneously position themselves as white and oppositionally juxtapose themselves against Black people. The pronoun aligns the reader with the author, precluding the possibility that the reader is among

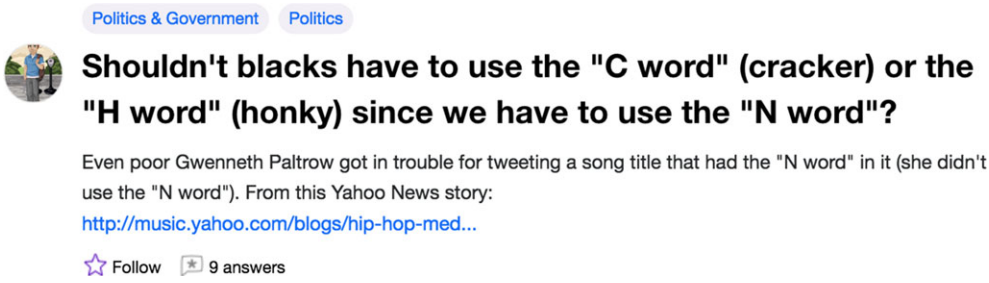

Figure 5. Yahoo! Answers user Yahoo Answer Angel's comment (2011) (http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120605150237AAApim3)

the group of "blacks" about whom Yahoo Answer Angel is complaining in Figure 5. 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 Yahoo Answer Angel glosses *C-word* and *H-word* in parentheses, neither user glosses *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. Through glossing, these (presumably white) users actively construct a semiotic link between *the C-word* and *cracker*. However, the glosses also undermine 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.

In fact, in instances when *the C-word* is used to refer to *cracker* non-ironically, there are usually a number of online commenters who remark that they find the euphemization unnecessary or trivial. For instance, the following is an example sentence from a definition of *the C-word* on Urban Dictionary (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=C-Word&defid=1256327):

(8) Very little of us "C-wordees" are offended by it, its [sic] another of those failed terms used to degrate [degrade] us.

The author of this definition, user Gee_Dubya, notes the general inoffensiveness of what they call a "failed term," although they mention that it can still be used with the intent to "degrade" its referents.

Cracker, Stance Cohorts, and the Making of "Reverse Racism"

The most salient referent of *the C-word* for many speakers of American English is *cunt*, and not *cracker*, as demonstrated by the prevalence of *cunt* in both Urban Dictionary and the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions of *the C-word*. On Urban Dictionary, six of the nine user-supplied definitions of *C-word* refer to *cunt*, whereas only one refers to *cracker*. In the *OED*, the primary definition of *C-word* is *cunt*, with all other meanings grouped together under a secondary definition, and *cracker* is not mentioned at all. It is thus a question of some theoretical import how *cracker* 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. As an example, see Ingraham's commentary on the Trayvon Martin case, cited above in (5). Due to Ingraham's deliberate intertextual engagement with a clip of the Zimmerman trial wherein racial terminology, specifically *cracker*, was the topic of discussion, it is evident 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 viewers of Ingraham's show are able to interpret the intended referent of her use of *the C-word* as *cracker*, instead of the more common referent *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 the terms used for white people also creates an imagined affinity between the two groups' experiences of racial abuse. The 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 negative attitudes toward whites. This equivalency is merely discursive, however, and is not borne out by the 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. Specifically, this discourse can contribute to the perception that whites are collectively disadvantaged on racial grounds and even systematically targeted for violence as a group (King 2015). I return to this potential consequence of "reverse racism" rhetoric in the conclusion.

In a nonparodic 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 while creating new affordances for meaning in the next utterance" (2014a:364). Indexicality and dialogicality are thus two sides of the same coin: in both, 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—indeed, the prototype of the category—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. Stancetaking is therefore a "category-bound activity" (Sacks 1972; Whitehead 2009): only those who want to lend credence to (or make space for) a narrative of reverse racism use *the C-word* to mean *cracker* non-ironically. When speakers like Ingraham euphemize *cracker* as *the C-word*, as in (5) above, 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 which comes 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, 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. Ingraham's euphemization reflects an evaluation of *cracker* as a racist term, whereas 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 in contrast to other stance cohorts. Ingraham's stance on *cracker* is fundamentally oppositional: it is a purported rejection of reverse racism. However, this position raises the question of who, precisely, she positions herself against. The effect of Ingraham's stance is to point toward a structural gap in the stance triangle: who is the opposing stance cohort? In this case, I argue that her stance is responsible for the constitution of a rival stance cohort of "reverse racists," possibly including the "left-wing elites" she condemns in her segment. In this way, the use of *the C-word*

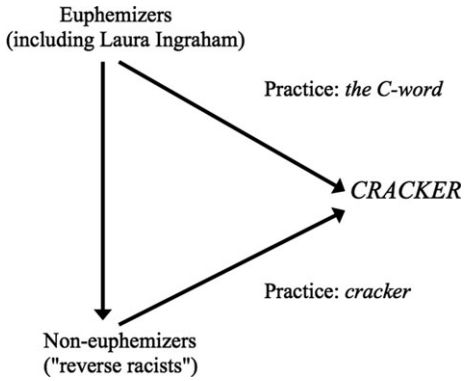

Figure 6. Stance triangle: Laura Ingraham's use of *the C-word*

accomplishes a number of social actions: it places Ingraham within a stance cohort of euphemizers, it contrasts that cohort with non-euphemizers, and it drags along the moral weight of the choice to euphemize in order to construct the latter group as anti-white racists.

In contrast to Laura Ingraham's use of *the C-word*, Al Sharpton's euphemization of *cracker* embodies a somewhat different stance. Since "individual speakers' histories of usage and repertoires are ... critical resources for the interpretation of their stance choices" (Jaffe 2009:19), a comparison of Sharpton's and Ingraham's political careers reveals that their uses of *the C-word* likely have distinct motivations, despite their superficial resemblance. Ingraham has long expressed opposition to a number of anti-racist ideals and projects, including the Black Lives Matter movement and affirmative action. Sharpton, on the other hand, has been involved in the civil rights movement for decades. He is an outspoken critic of anti-Black racism and was one of a number of prominent Black leaders to publicly call for justice after Trayvon Martin's death (Weiner, Busdeker, and Comas 2012). While it is probable that Ingraham construes *cracker* as a legitimate and vicious anti-white insult, it is unlikely that Sharpton sees the word as similarly injurious.

In the segment of his MSNBC show from which the data are drawn, Sharpton and two panelists address the question of whether Trayvon Martin's use of the word *nigga* to refer to George Zimmerman "canceled or balanced out" his use of *cracka* (i.e., whether it lessened the impact of *cracka* as a specifically racial term).[8] As previously mentioned, when video of Rachel Jeantel's testimony is played on the show, *nigga* is censored but *cracka* is not. In discussing the clip, however, Sharpton makes a deliberate stance choice: he says *the C-word* instead of *cracka/er*. The use of the euphemistic structure is an intentional decision, not a nonce formation, since he repeats *the C-word* later in the same segment. In fact, neither Sharpton nor his panelists utter *cracka/er* in full at any point.

I theorize that for Sharpton, this euphemization may constitute an attempt to project a stance of neutrality about the potential offensiveness of the word *cracka/er*. Because Sharpton was acting as the moderator of a conversation about whether *nigga* and *cracka/er* "cancel each other out," viewers likely expected him to be impartial as to whether the two words are equally offensive. In the video, Sharpton repeatedly uses the slur-once-removed construction for *the N-word*. His parallel use of *the C-word*, then, may have been a tactic to avert possible criticism from viewers. To euphemize *nigga* but not *cracka/er* would have been to take a stance that one merited censorship but not the other—that is, that the former was a worse slur than the latter. For Sharpton to be accused of linguistic unfairness on these grounds, particularly as a prominent Black political voice, could have been tantamount to an allegation that he did not take anti-white language seriously (and perhaps even lead to charges of being a "reverse racist"). Thus, euphemization may have been a strategic attempt to come across as unbiased.

Furthermore, Sharpton's first use of the slur-once-removed (in (6) above) comes in a reference to "the language these kids use, the N-word, the C-word." By introducing the stance cohort "these kids," to which he then juxtaposes himself, Sharpton further clarifies his own stance of neutrality. "These kids" are a linguistic community of practice, presumably including Martin and Jeantel, who are characterized as using racial terminology. Of course, "these kids" would not actually say *the C-word*; they say *cracka/er*, as shown in Jeantel's videotaped testimony. By employing a different linguistic practice—the slur-once-removed construction—Sharpton takes a stance of disalignment with "these kids," simultaneously distancing himself from these supposed youthful users of contentious racial terminology and positioning himself as more cautious about these words. Figure 7 schematizes Sharpton's projection of the opposing stance cohort "these kids," as well as his own divergent stance practice.

It is possible that Sharpton does not even personally believe in the existence of reverse racism, and he may not object to the use of the word *cracker* in other contexts. On the air during this particularly racially charged historical moment, however,

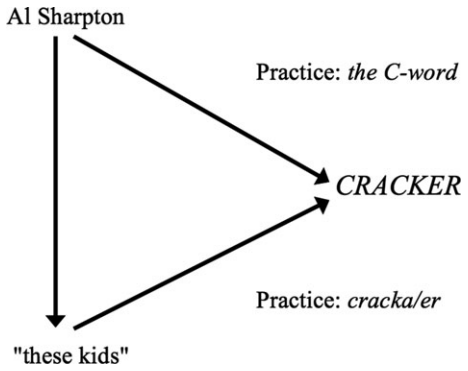

Figure 7. Stance triangle: Al Sharpton's use of *the C-word*

euphemization may have been the most prudent option. Sharpton's linguistic choice to use the slur-once-removed permits him plausible deniability and allows him to remain formally neutral on the issue of whether *cracka/er* is on the same order of severity as the anti-Black slur. Regardless of his actual beliefs, however, Sharpton's use of *the C-word* has the same discursive effect as Ingraham's: it presupposes and (re)legitimizes the position that *cracker* might be so offensive it needs to be euphemized. The act of creating a space for this position gives credence to, and ultimately helps to construct, the idea that reverse racism is a real problem and must be treated delicately.

Conclusion

When Trayvon Martin referred to George Zimmerman as 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 deeply consequential effects in the social and political world. Bucholtz (2009:166) 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." This article takes up this call by demonstrating one way that stance cohorts function to construct the "more enduring subject position" of reverse racism.

In this article I have defined the slur-once-removed as a discursive construction that has the power to create slurs through a process of reverse resignification. Further, I have argued that the act of euphemizing *cracker* as *the C-word* mobilizes authority from a larger, dialogically accessible stance cohort to construct *cracker* as a racist slur—one just as racist as *nigger*. This instantiation of the slur-once-removed works in the service of the project of constructing "reverse racism," using language to indexically create a narrative that antiwhiteness is on par with anti-Blackness. To compare instances of perceived white victimization with the centuries of dehumanizing exploitation and oppression faced by Black people in the United States effectively trivializes that oppression, discursively reducing it to the equivalent of being called an insulting name. Arguably, then, the parity that is created through the dialogic construction of *the C-word* as equivalent to *the N-word* represents a form of denial of the American racial hierarchy that systematically disenfranchises Black people and benefits whites..

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 resulted in indexical failure, and did not take root as a common cultural practice, two factors come into focus. First, many people's association between *the C-word* and *cunt* is so strong that it may be difficult to bypass, making any new assignment of *the C-word* a challenging indexical task. We must also consider what language users 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 with the use of *the C-word*, supposed anti-white bias and structural anti-Black racism are discursively put on equal footing, many people are familiar with the dramatic difference in the histories of the two ethnoracial groups. Discourse can do quite a lot to shape the social order, but it cannot do everything. For a new discursive move to be effective—to stick the landing, so to speak—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 comes about. In these cases, the new form-meaning 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 straightforwardly mean *cracker* for most members of American society, the slur-once-removed construction itself has a much broader life in racial discourse. In recent years, it has even been extended to *racist* itself. In Bloom's analysis of the Zimmerman murder trial, she details how the prosecuting attorney worked hard 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, Debra Nelson, 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). During the controversial 2016 American 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). This instance of the slur-once-removed works 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 reparative discussions about oppression without the perceptions of white victimhood that can accompany even the most objective acknowledgment 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 gain ground, it further publicized the slur-once-removed mechanism for future use by speakers working toward the same ideological and discursive projects.

Claims of white victimization are not new, but they have seen a dramatic resurgence during and since the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Many white Trump voters admit to being motivated by perceptions of their own collective oppression in the face of social progress for people of color (Sedensky 2016). Although these are mere feelings, they have the power to substantially shape reality when voters bring their ideologies to the ballot box. The use of the slur-once-removed for words that apply to white people is one part, albeit a small one, of the discursive construction of these narratives of white marginalization.

Lipsitz writes that "[r]ace is a cultural construct, but one with deadly social causes and consequences" (2006:2). Trayvon Martin was culturally constructed as a reverse racist on the discursive level, but this led to a very real denial of justice when it was used to justify his death at the hands of George Zimmerman. Likewise, although the slur-once-removed is a sociocultural construct, it has material, consequential effects in the social world. 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 to refrain from mentioning a referent directly, it functions to avoid reanimating the voices of those who originally aimed to wound people with that slur—and the accompanying violence, both discursive and physical. 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.

Notes

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1. Throughout the article, I use the capitalized form *Black* to refer to members of the African diaspora (Tharps 2014), following the convention used by a number of Black authors. The capitalization is both a matter of respect and a recognition that "'Black' constitutes a group, an ethnicity" (Touré 2011:ix). I do not give *white* the same treatment because it refers not to a coherent ethnic identity, but to a social positionality which is afforded unearned power.

2. Although the final word of this phrase is often spelled as rhotic—*cracker*—in media and scholarly reports, in the video recording of the trial Jeantel utters the non-rhotic form, *cracka*.

3. I am acutely aware that even citational uses of this word are partially responsible for its continued circulation and harm. I mention it only when necessary to disambiguate between the slur itself and its metalinguistic euphemization, and avoid it as much as possible. Because I do not recognize *cracka/er* as similarly harmful, I use the full form of this term.

4. Because of the anonymity afforded by the online fora in which the data were collected, it was not possible to determine the gender of most users. Therefore, the present analysis does not take user gender into account.

5. Not all speakers who use the slur-once-removed construction do so because of perceptions of harm caused by the euphemized word(s). Certain online users in the data do not frame *cracker* as having the power to inflict racial harm, but instead imply that any racial euphemism is at best unnecessary and at worst a suppression of free speech or a form of hyper-political correctness. Others employ the slur-once-removed jokingly, mocking the use of *the N-word* in particular, thus appropriating this antiracist discourse practice in a way that delegitimizes it (cf. Ehrlich and King 1992). A third group focuses more on ensuring discursive equivalency than on avoiding racial harm. This perspective holds that it is somehow unfair to whites to euphemize *the N-word* but not to euphemize *cracker*. The concern seems to be about

the perceived inconsistency of this practice, rather than a sincerely held belief that *cracker* is in fact harmful.

6. As of February 2017, there were 16 Urban Dictionary entries for *N-word*. Fourteen of these referred to *nigger*, and the other two appeared to be nonce uses of the formula.

7. As of February 2017, there were 302 Urban Dictionary entries for *cracker* and 42 for *cracka* (compared to 519 for *nigger* and 421 for *nigga*). There were 9 definitions for *C-word*, only one of which referred to *cracker*.

8. In addition to testifying that Martin told her that Zimmerman looked like a "creepy-ass cracka," Jeantel reported that he also said "this nigga is still following me now." By asking if the words "cancel or balance" each other out, Sharpton was inquiring as to whether calling Zimmerman both of them meant that Martin was not specifically racially interpellating Zimmerman as white, but simply using *cracka* and *nigga* to refer to a man more generally. The reader is referred to Rickford and King (2016) and Slobe (2016) for an in-depth analysis of the significance of racial terminology in Rachel Jeantel's testimony and cross-examination.

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