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Accusatory and exculpatory moves in the hunting for “Racists” language game



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ABSTRACT

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Race talk in the US frequently singles out individuals as “racists,” positioning them as outliers in a society that has supposedly moved beyond race. However, this type of “language game” is premised upon a narrow understanding of racism that reduces it to individual bigotry while ignoring its systemic dimensions. This article examines the accusatory and exculpatory moves in this language game by analyzing three cases that received mainstream media attention. The analysis shows that the discursive moves ultimately work to reproduce dominant ideological assumptions, doing more to protect white privilege than to dismantle racism. This occurs even as speakers engage in ostensibly anti-racist talk.

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1. Introduction

In US society, public discourse about racism in the mainstream media comes to the fore after the occurrence of what Doane (2006) terms a “racial event.” Racial events are “occurrences whose racialized character triggers extensive public discussion and consideration of racial issues” (259). What is interesting about contemporary racial discourse after such events is the presence of a widespread consensus that the type of overt discrimination and bigotry indicative of the Jim Crow era is unacceptable and immoral. However, along with the widespread denouncement of such forms of racism comes a widespread belief that racism has supposedly declined in significance (Feagin, 2010: 14). Yet, as widely recognized by minorities and race scholars, racism continues to structure US society at an individual and institutional level. Racism has not disappeared, it has simply become less overt and more subtle than the more recognizable forms of Jim Crow racism of the past. The shape of today’s “systemic racism” (Feagin, 2006) is driven by a “colorblind” ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) that continues to rationalize racial inequality.

Language plays a central role in perpetuating today’s racism (Van Dijk, 1987, 1992; Hill, 1998; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Barrett, 2006; Alim and Reyes, 2011; Koven, 2013; Yamaguchi, 2013) and racializing practices (Bucholtz and Trechter, 2001; Pagliai, 2009; Dick and Wirtz, 2011; Roth-Gordon, 2011, 2012). Moreover, language itself is often featured at the center of racial events that involve, for example, racist remarks and racial slurs (Hill, 2008; Croom, 2013). It is through the discourse that ensues after such racial events that understandings about race and racism are articulated and rearticulated. In this process, speakers in the mainstream media draw from presupposed understandings of what racism means as they attempt to make sense of the incidents. However, those presupposed understandings rely heavily upon dominant ideological assumptions that further rationalize the current racial structure. In other words, understandings of racism pass through the discourse with little critical inspection and end up reproducing “common sense” ideas that reduce racism to individual acts of bigotry while erasing its collective and systemic dimensions. Crucially, this occurs even as speakers engage in talk about racism that ostensibly denounces acts of bigotry (Hill, 2009).

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In this paper, I explore a form of talk about racism that I refer to as the *hunting for “racists” language game*. I draw from [Bonilla-Silva’s \(2013\)](#) use of the “hunting for ‘racists’” metaphor, which he uses to describe how the common approach to race relations often centers on “the careful separation of good and bad, tolerant and intolerant Americans” (15). Furthermore, I draw from [Wittgenstein’s \(2001 \[1953\]\)](#) notion of a “language game,” which emphasizes the way a word can take on different meanings depending upon the activity in which it is embedded. As a routine subset of US racial discourse—particularly in response to events that involve racial slurs or racist remarks—the hunting for “racists” language game involves a discursive exercise whereby individuals are accused or absolved of being “racists.” To play the hunting for “racists” language game, speakers necessarily rely upon a narrow meaning of *racism* grounded in assumptions forwarded by the dominant ideological perspective. This perspective, which is well captured by [Hill \(2008\)](#) in her description of the “folk theory of race and racism,” as well as by [Bonilla-Silva \(2013\)](#) in his discussion of colorblind racism, defines racism solely in individualist terms, ignoring the way racism operates as a collective system of power that continues to structure US society around white privilege.

In the analysis, I explore how the hunting for “racists” language game unfolds discursively across multiple sites of interaction. The discourse data I examine come from three high-profile cases in recent years where mainstream media discourse has focused on allegations of slurs or racist remarks uttered by figures in the public spotlight. These include the case of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watchman in Florida who killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, in 2012. In the recording of a 911 call Zimmerman made before he pursued and eventually killed Martin, there was intense media speculation on whether he could be heard uttering a racial slur ([Hodges, forthcoming](#)). My analysis examines the way his supporters countered the allegation that Zimmerman was a “racist” through the use of “small stories” ([Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008](#)) as argumentative devices. The two other cases involve Donald Sterling, then-owner of the LA Clippers NBA team, and Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher involved in a dispute with the federal government over his refusal to pay grazing fees while using public lands. Both Sterling and Bundy uttered remarks around the same time in 2014 that became the center of media attention. However, their cases differed from Zimmerman’s in important ways. Not only was Zimmerman implicated in the shooting death of an innocent individual, but the evidence of his alleged use of a racial slur was inconclusive. In contrast, both Sterling and Bundy indubitably spoke the remarks attributed to them, and those remarks themselves sparked the ensuing racial events. Moreover, as the analysis examines, many of the same voices who defended Zimmerman within the hunting for “racists” language game played the accusatory role with Sterling and Bundy. Bundy’s case is particularly interesting in that he was receiving vocal and enthusiastic support from many of those same voices up to the point he made his remarks.

In the next section, I provide further background on the ideologies of race and language that undergird the hunting for “racists” language game; I also provide more details on the three cases examined in the analysis. The analysis then involves two parts with each part focusing on one side of the either/or binary set up by the language game. The first part analyzes the exculpatory moves in the game, and the second part analyzes the accusatory moves. Finally, I conclude by discussing the differences between the cases and the broader implications for public discourse about racism. My main claim is that the hunting for “racists” language game, including the various discursive moves that contribute to the game, ultimately works to reproduce dominant ideological assumptions about racism; and the end result is to protect white privilege rather than to dismantle racism.

2. The hunting for “Racists” language game

The hunting for “racists” language game arises from assumptions associated with the dominant racial ideology in US society. This ideology encompasses “the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify” the racial status quo ([Bonilla-Silva, 2013: 9](#)). These frameworks are well represented in what [Hill \(2008\)](#) terms the “folk theory of race and racism.” As [Hill \(2008\)](#) describes, a central tenet of this ideological framework is the reduction of the meaning of racism to individual bigotry or racially motivated animus. In other words, “the folk theory holds that racism is entirely a matter of individual beliefs, intentions, and actions” ([Hill, 2008: 6](#)). As a result, racial discourse can easily become “snarled in the prejudice problematic” whereby racism comes to be primarily understood as “individual psychological dispositions” ([Bonilla-Silva, 2013: 7](#)) rather than as a social system supported by collective actions. “Systemic racism” ([Feagin, 2006](#)) is therefore ignored or erased from view, including its deep-seated institutional dimensions as well as the “implicit racial biases (which often exist side-by-side with an outwardly non-racist demeanor and persona) [that] frequently influence the way we view and treat others” ([Wise, 2010: v](#)). Such biases, as research by social psychologists has shown ([Eberhardt et al. 2004, inter alia](#)), structure everyday interactions that contribute to the collective reenactment of racism as a system of power based upon white privilege. In discourse shaped by the assumptions of the dominant ideology, these critical understandings of the workings of racism are elided from the discourse. Instead, the discourse focuses sharply on the overt and visible actions of individuals who can be singled out as “racists.” Since the dominant ideology minimizes racism ([Bonilla-Silva, 2013](#)), such individuals are viewed as exceptions in a society that has supposedly moved beyond racism ([Hill, 2008: 6](#)).

Language itself becomes a prominent way “racists” are identified within the hunting for “racists” language game. Given the focus on defining racism solely in terms of individual actions, words attributed to an individual (e.g. slurs, epithets, racist remarks) become valuable forms of evidence. The evidentiary focus on words is supported by the language ideology of personalism ([Rosaldo, 1982](#); see also, [Duranti, 1993](#); [Hill, 2000, 2008](#)); and, to a lesser extent, the language ideology of referentialism ([Silverstein, 1976](#)). As sets of beliefs about language ([Silverstein, 1979](#); [Kroskrity, 2004](#); [Bucholtz and Hall, 2008](#)), these language ideologies work in tandem with the dominant racial ideology. Since personalism matches words to an individual’s beliefs and intentions, it aids the racial ideology’s interest in locating racism within an individual’s psyche. The words themselves act as conduits ([Reddy, 1979](#)) of meaning that provide that window into an individual’s beliefs and

intentions. As Hill (2008) describes, based on the ideology of personalism, if a word “can be shown to be a slur that has ugly and pejorative meanings, then a person who uses it must be a racist who believes that the targets of the slur are ugly and deserving of the label and intends to communicate this fact” (65). Therefore, racial slurs and racist remarks often initiate the hunting for “racists” language game by sparking an intense media focus on the words along with discursive moves that accuse or defend the individuals of being “racists.”

Hill (2008) refers to such events as “moral panics,” borrowing the term from Cohen (2002 [1972]) to refer to the public reactions generated by visibly racist words. Inspired by the personalist language ideology, intense focus on the inner selves of the public figures that utter the words plays out “in mass media firestorms, during which the offensive remark is repeated again and again, over days and even weeks, both by those who wish to defend the speaker and by those who are on the attack” (Hill, 2008: 43). Racial events that feature racist words seem to occur with regularity in US society. In recent years, the list of public figures that have incited such reactions include the celebrity chef Paula Deen in 2013, comedian Michael Richards and Senator George Allen in 2006, and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott in 2002. By igniting moral panics, these types of discourse events enable the “articulation and rearticulation of racial understandings” (Doane, 2006: 259). They represent “significant moments in cultural production and reproduction” (Hill, 2008: 101). As reactions are organized within the framework of the hunting for “racists” language game, what mainly gets articulated and rearticulated—or produced and reproduced—is the narrow understanding of racism associated with the dominant ideology.

Within the bounds of any given language game, certain moves and words make sense, while those same moves and words may not make sense in the same way outside that activity. Within the framework of the hunting for “racists” language game, *racism* comes to take on a specifically narrow meaning; and participants must draw upon that meaning to play the game. This ideologically informed understanding of racism guides the activity of categorizing individuals so that the activity sets up a clear binary distinction between “racists” and non-racists. In turn, engaging in the language game at once represents and reproduces the dominant perspective by simplifying the complex dimensions of racism that go beyond individual bigotry. The media discourse that enables the hunting for “racists” language game thereby renders only certain aspects of racism intelligible as racism. The spotlight turns from racism as a system of power to “racists” as individual anomalies.

3. Case studies and data

3.1. *The case of George Zimmerman*

On the evening of February 26, 2012, neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman shot dead Trayvon Martin, an African American high school student who was staying in the neighborhood. After spotting Martin, Zimmerman began following him, describing him as a “suspicious guy” to a 911 dispatcher. After making that 911 call, Zimmerman continued to follow Martin against the explicit advice of the police dispatcher. A confrontation ensued and Zimmerman ended up killing Martin with the gun he carried. From a critical perspective, the issue of race undergirded the incident in myriad ways. “At issue are the ways racism impacted how Trayvon Martin was perceived by George Zimmerman—namely, as a criminal suspect in accord with stereotypes that associate young black men with crime—and how the Sanford police affirmed Zimmerman’s suspicion and gave Zimmerman the benefit of the doubt after he killed an unarmed black teenager” (Hodges, 2015: 419). While much of the mainstream media discourse about the incident failed to provide the necessary contextualization to understand the ways race and racism factored into the incident, intense focus did swirl around Zimmerman’s alleged use of a slur during the 911 call he made before killing Trayvon Martin.

Media focus on the issue of the alleged slur included three shows on CNN—the March 21, March 26, and April 4 episodes of Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees—dedicated to replaying the tape. Across those shows, the tape was replayed in two separate sound rooms with two separate audio engineers who slowed down and isolated the segment in question (Hodges, forthcoming). The recontextualizations effectively formed the first move in the hunting for “racists” language game whereby evidence was put forth to provisionally accuse Zimmerman of being a “racist.” In the first part of the analysis below, I focus on the exculpatory moves made by Zimmerman’s supporters to deflect those accusations. To these ends, I trace the social life of two “small stories” about Zimmerman inserted by supporters into the national media discourse.

3.2. *The cases of Donald Sterling and Cliven Bundy*

On April 25, 2014, racist remarks made by NBA team owner Donald Sterling were reported by the TMZ celebrity news site. Major media outlets ran with the story and recontextualized the remarks in the days and weeks that followed. The remarks originated in a taped phone call between Sterling and a female friend. During the conversation, Sterling made disparaging remarks about African Americans. He told his friend, “It bothers me a lot that you want to broadcast that you’re associating with black people. Do you have to?” He then told her “not to bring them to my games” (TMZ, 2014). In the incident’s fallout, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver issued a lifetime ban against Sterling, fined him \$2.5 million, and asked the league’s owners to force the sale of his team; the sale was eventually completed in August 2014. In the days and weeks after the phone call was made public, media personalities from across the political spectrum weighed in on the remarks.

Around the same time of the media focus on Donald Sterling, Nevada cattle rancher Cliven Bundy received similar attention for remarks he made. At the time, Bundy had become a celebrity of sorts among Tea Party conservatives for his stance against the federal government. Bundy had been grazing cattle on public land since 1993 without paying the required

permit fees. According to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bundy owed more than \$1 million in unpaid fees and fines. When the BLM—whose authority Bundy refused to recognize—attempted to remove his cattle from public land, they were met by a host of armed supporters of Bundy. The media attention gained during the brief stand-off (the federal agents backed off without further incident) shined a spotlight on Bundy and his anti-government views. Republican politicians and conservative media personalities voiced support for Bundy and what they saw as his plight against an overreaching federal government, turning Bundy into a type of everyman spokesperson for Tea Party conservatism.

In speaking to supporters and a reporter on his ranch on April 19, Bundy voiced his opinions on a variety of issues. As reported in *The New York Times* on April 23, his diatribe soon turned to race as he made the following remarks:

“I want to tell you one more thing I know about the Negro,” he said. Mr. Bundy recalled driving past a public-housing project in North Las Vegas, “and in front of that government house the door was usually open and the older people and the kids — and there is always at least a half a dozen people sitting on the porch — they didn’t have nothing to do. They didn’t have nothing for their kids to do. They didn’t have nothing for their young girls to do.

“And because they were basically on government subsidy, so now what do they do?” he asked. “They abort their young children, they put their young men in jail, because they never learned how to pick cotton. And I’ve often wondered, are they better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things, or are they better off under government subsidy? They didn’t get no more freedom. They got less freedom.” (Nagourney, 2014)

In the fallout, those who only days earlier were calling Bundy a hero for standing up against the federal government turned against him within the hunting for “racists” language game. In the second part of the analysis, I examine public reactions to both Sterling and Bundy in the national media.

3.3. *Mainstream media discourse*

Data that form the basis of both parts of the analysis come from transcripts of the three major cable news channels in US society—CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. For the case of George Zimmerman, I examined a corpus of transcripts that spanned several months after the case first gained national media attention in March 2012. I then traced the social life of the small stories that appeared in those transcripts to their originating and subsequent contexts in the blogosphere. For the cases of Donald Sterling and Cliven Bundy, I examined a corpus of transcripts that spanned several weeks after their remarks entered the national media spotlight in April 2014, paying special attention to the way voices that defended Zimmerman reacted.¹

Given the analytic focus on the way many of the same voices that defended Zimmerman reacted to Sterling and Bundy, only examples and excerpts from Fox News and CNN are featured in the analysis. This is because these channels, especially Fox News, were more likely to feature those voices. In considering the three major cable news channels as a whole, there was a qualitative difference in how discussants dealt with race and racism across these channels. Not surprisingly given the ordinary political leanings associated with the three channels, MSNBC was the most likely to entertain critical perspectives and feature scholars engaged in the critical study of race as guests, while Fox News was the most likely to feature hosts and guests that espouse a colorblind perspective on race. CNN fell somewhere in between. Moreover, it is important to note that these mainstream media outlets represent only part of the wider discourse about race and racism across US society; I focus on these media outlets here because my interest in this paper is on mainstream understandings of racism.

4. Defending “Racists” and minimizing racism

As part of the “hunting for ‘racists’” language game, accusations made against individuals are open to rebuttals and counter-accusations. This can be seen in the case of George Zimmerman. After media attention began to focus on the question of whether he uttered a racial slur during the 911 call he made before killing Trayvon Martin, supporters defended him across multiple media settings. Across these settings, an important feature of the counter-argumentative discourse was the appearance of two small

¹ Transcripts from Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC were retrieved using the LexisNexis database. Short examples used in the analysis were taken directly from these transcripts. However, longer excerpts featured in the analysis were created while watching video of the segments; video clips were accessed online. In those excerpts, the following transcript conventions are used:

.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
,	Continuing intonation
–	Marks an abrupt cut-off
:	Length
<u>word</u>	Indicates stress/emphasis placed on word
[]	Simultaneous or overlapping speech
=	Latching, or contiguous utterances
(.)	Short pause
()	Unintelligible speech
((words))	Transcriber’s comments or description of non-speech activity

stories about Zimmerman's past encounters with African Americans. I refer to these stories below as the "tutoring story" and the "homeless man" story as I examine important moments in their social life, or "natural history" (Silverstein and Urban, 1996).

Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) use the term *small stories* to encompass "a gamut of underrepresented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events, but it also captures allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell" (381; see also, Bamberg, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Although small stories may lack the detailed emplotment typical of well-formed narratives, such forms of storytelling achieve important interactional work within the framework of the hunting for "racists" language game. Since the small stories I examine exist as intertextual series (Hanks, 1986) with a life cycle that extends beyond any singular speech event (Hymes, 1974), these stories do important work both within the immediate interactional contexts in which they are embedded as well as across those contexts to support the larger ideological assumptions that drive the language game.

First, small stories act as valuable argumentative devices for Zimmerman's supporters as they defend him against accusations of being a "racist." As widely recognized by narrative scholars (Carranza, 1998; De Fina, 2000; Schiffrin, 1990, *inter alia*) and discussed by De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2011: 97–98), stories are commonly offered by speakers as supporting evidence to back up argumentative claims. The power of narrative to support claims derives from the value of experience-based evidence in everyday reasoning. As De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2011) point out, "experiential" evidence is much more difficult to reject than rational argumentation" (98). Moreover, small stories can feature testimony from an eyewitness, an important type of evidence that shifts focus from the narrator's personal opinion to an outside source of authority (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2011: 98). Small stories therefore provide important supporting evidence as speakers counter accusations in the hunting for "racists" language game.

Second, small stories perform identity work by positioning individuals as certain types of characters that fulfill recognizable social roles. As work on identity and interaction emphasizes, identity "is constituted through social action, and especially through language," rather than simply being a static feature fully determined prior to discursive encounters (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 589; see also, Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Narrative scholars have focused extensively on the way storytellers position the self through storytelling (e.g. Bamberg, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2007). But storytellers also hold a privileged position to shape not just their own identities but those of others "according to social circumstances" (De Fina, 2000: 134). Moreover, storytellers draw from widely circulating generic ideas about plots and characters, which act as "conventional 'models' for limiting the hermeneutic task of making sense of human happenings" (Bruner, 1991: 14). Within the hunting for "racists" language game, the two broad types of individuals are clearly delineated in the generic models of the white-robed pointy-hood wearing "racist" in relation to the virtuous non-racist.

Finally, these small stories are not told in isolated settings. Rather, the small stories form intertextual series that connect the multiple interactional contexts with each other as well as with widely circulating narratives about race and racism. The intertextual connections of these small stories across speech events therefore work to "yield social formations" (Agha, 2005:4) and to facilitate the discursive exercise of power (Briggs and Bauman, 1992) beyond the immediate interactional context (Bauman, 2005: 146). In other words, as these small stories enter into the hunting for "racists" language game, which unfolds across multiple discursive settings, the stories draw from and reinforce dominant assumptions about race and racism that have been previously encoded in wider ideologically inspired narratives.

References to the two small stories used to defend Zimmerman can be seen in the excerpt below. The excerpt is taken from an interview that Fox News host Sean Hannity did with George Zimmerman's father, Robert Zimmerman, on April 4, 2012. As Hannity asks Robert Zimmerman about the slur his son allegedly uttered during the 911 call, he sets up his question by embedding references to the tutoring and homeless man stories. Robert Zimmerman then responds with additional details.

Hannity, FOX 9:30 PM EST, Wednesday, April 4, 2012

Sean Hannity talks with George Zimmerman's father, Robert Zimmerman.

- Hannity: There have been implications that have been made. One was that on the 911 tape that we just played, that he might have used a racial slur. That has been countered by other people. Um. Two stories that I have recently read, and one is that- Is it true that your son (.) uh (.) would tutor African American and minority children on the weekend? Uh and is it also true that there was a case involving the Sanford police in which one of- a son of a police officer hit a- an African American homeless man and then he spoke out against the policeman. Is that true too, sir?
- Zimmerman: It's true, concerning the (.) assault on the homeless man. He went around to churches and put flyers on people's cars, and (.) uh he just felt sorry for this homeless man not having anyone to support him.
- Hannity: Right. Did=
- Zimmerman: =And he (.)
- Hannity: Has he ever used [Zimmerman: Oh I'm sorry.] any racial- any racial slur that you know of sir?
- Zimmerman: None whatsoever.
- Hannity: Yeah.

Together, Hannity and Robert Zimmerman co-construct the allusions to these small stories. The small stories enter into this interactional setting when Hannity asks, "Is it true your son would tutor African American children on the weekend? And is it also true there was a case in which a son of a police officer hit an African American homeless man and then he spoke out

against the policeman?” These short references allude to previous tellings of the stories, and Hannity’s questions provide Robert Zimmerman with an opportunity to tell those stories again. In his response, Zimmerman contributes additional details about how George Zimmerman helped a homeless man: “He went around to churches and put flyers on people’s cars.” He concludes this short account of his son’s past actions with an evaluation of why his son acted as he did: “He just felt sorry for this homeless man not having anyone to support him.”

Within this particular interaction, the small stories lack explicit scaffolding to explain their import as counter-evidence to the accusation that George Zimmerman is a “racist.” Yet much of that scaffolding has already been set up in previous contexts. Here, through what [Silverstein \(2003\)](#) terms presupposed indexicality, the small stories index—or point back to—those previous contexts and bring with them much of the contextual meanings established in the previous contexts. Lacking the full employment of well-developed narratives, the insertion of these small stories into the current context act as economical reminders of the full stories as well as the import of those stories for the defense of George Zimmerman against racist accusations. Namely, they work to position Zimmerman as a particular type of character at odds with the popular understanding of “racists” per the dominant ideology. Below, I examine the intertextual connections of each of these stories in more detail and then discuss how they accomplish the ideological work they do.

4.1. Tutoring story

A few weeks before Hannity’s reference to it, the tutoring story also appears in an interview that CNN’s Anderson Cooper does with George Zimmerman’s attorney, Craig Sonner. Again, the question of Zimmerman’s alleged use of a slur in the 911 tape features prominently in the interview. If the accusation of the slur holds up, Zimmerman can be labeled a “racist” per the logic of the dominant ideology. Sonner provides a rendition of the tutoring story as a piece of counter-evidence.

Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees, CNN 10:00 PM EST, Friday, March 23, 2012

Anderson Cooper talks with Craig Sonner, George Zimmerman’s attorney.

Cooper: There are some people who believe that um your client may have uttered a racial slur. Uh some have uh heard those 911 tapes, they believe they may have heard that muttered under his breath. Has he made any indication to you about whether or not he did utter a racial slur?

Sonner: Um I don’t believe he did utter a racial slur. I’ve asked him if he uses racial slurs and he has denied that. And as well as um- He’s been involved in a mentorship program, which I think the funding was cut, but he actually mentored um uh two African American- Well he and uh um- was a mentor to an African American boy age of 14 and his wife was a mentor to a 13-year-old uh girl from uh- you know via their parents. And in this- I talked to the mother of the two children and she indicated- I asked her, you know, did he make comments to you that indicated he was a racist? And she said no. And she is African American, and for the things that he’s done, you know, as far as taking the children to um the mall, you know every- He took them to the mall, took them to the science center, did the kind of outings um to- to help, you know, to help the children have time out to- to be a friend to them. Uh I don’t believe that’s the indication of a person who’s a racist to do that.

In his defense of Zimmerman, Sonner spells out the tutoring story in more detail than in its subsequent reference by Hannity. As he introduces the small story, Sonner begins with a Labovian abstract that summarizes the gist of the story ([Labov, 1972](#)). “He’s been involved in a mentorship program,” Sonner says. Sonner then elaborates, “He actually mentored an African American boy.” Sonner then details ongoing and habitual actions entailed in the mentorship program: “He took them to the mall, took them to the science center...” and so on. Although he does not specifically mention tutoring, one could easily assume tutoring might be part of these activities. More importantly, Sonner places Zimmerman’s actions within the type of evaluative frames common to narrative ([Labov and Waletzky, 1967](#)). At the end of the small story, Sonner concludes, “I don’t believe that’s the indication of a person who’s a racist.”

Within the immediate interactional context, the small story functions as a rhetorical tool to support Sonner’s claim that Zimmerman is not a “racist.” Crucially, the underlying logic of his argument builds upon assumptions from the dominant ideology. Namely, it draws from the either/or binary of an archetypical “racist” and its antithesis, the virtuous non-racist. Both characters play important roles within the generic framework of the dominant ideology’s grand narrative about racism. That grand narrative features the two opposing forces of “good” and “bad” in a society where virtuous non-racists supplant the individual acts of bigotry and racially based animus carried out by “racists.” It is against this background that the small story about Zimmerman-the-mentor draws much of its meaning and provides impetus to the tutoring story as a powerful argumentative device to refute the accusation against Zimmerman.

The underlying logic of Sonner’s argument can be summarized as follows: *Zimmerman is not a “racist” because “racists” engage in outwardly visible acts of racially motivated hate. To the contrary, Zimmerman is a virtuous non-racist because he engages in visible acts of kindness towards African Americans. As an exemplum, see how he has been involved in a mentorship program of an African American boy. This type of behavior is indicative of a virtuous non-racist, not a “racist.” Therefore, the accusation that he is a “racist” is refuted because he cannot be engaged in both types of behavior.* Again, note how this line of reasoning mirrors the underlying logic of the dominant ideological assumptions about the nature of racism and who counts as a “racist.”

Sonner strengthens the tutoring story by including a witness to provide testimony against the idea that Zimmerman could be a “racist.” As he conveys to Anderson Cooper, “I talked to the mother of the two children.” Sonner continues, “I asked her, you know, ‘Did he make comments to you that indicated he was a racist?’ And she said ‘no.’” This independent voice provides corroboration for Sonner’s claim. No longer is it simply Sonner’s view that Zimmerman is not a “racist,” now an outside source is quoted as verifying that he is not. Moreover, that source is designed as a reliable spokesperson who can speak authoritatively about the matter due to two aspects of her identity that are made salient in the discourse. First, she is the boy’s mother (“I talked to the mother of the two children”). As such, throughout the mentoring relationship the mother presumably had opportunities to interact with Zimmerman on multiple occasions and to assess his character. Second, Sonner emphasizes her race, stating, “And she is African American.” The implication here is that her racial identity qualifies her to recognize “racists” when she sees them. When looked at against the broader backdrop of colorblind ideology, this move might appear at odds with the desire to ignore race. But here, race is strategically highlighted to effectively ignore racism. In other words, Sonner seems not so much interested in the mother’s lived experience with systemic racism as he is with using her subject position as an African American woman to testify about a much more limited view of racism. Namely, her qualifications are implicitly confined to being able to authoritatively label someone as a “racist” or non-racist per the rules of the hunting for “racists” language game. It is bitter irony that the voice of an African American woman can be used to implicitly reinforce a limited view of racism that all too often prevents people of color from speaking authoritatively about their lived experiences with systemic racism. But here, Sonner pulls the woman’s voice into the hunting for “racists” language game in a way that confines that voice to the parameters of the game’s rules.

4.2. Homeless man story

The originating context of the homeless man story appears to be a letter written by a member of George Zimmerman’s family on March 26 and addressed to the Seminole County president of the NAACP. The letter, which references the homeless man story, was then featured on the conservative blog, The Daily Caller, on April 2. An excerpt from that blog piece follows:

In a letter obtained exclusively by The Daily Caller on Monday, a family member of George Zimmerman ripped Seminole County, Fla. NAACP president Turner Clayton for a rush to judgment in the Trayvon Martin case.

“It’s time for you to end the race issue in this matter and call for cooler heads to prevail,” the letter reads. “If something happens to George as a result of the race furor stirred up by this mischaracterization of George there will be blood on your hands as well as the rest of the racists that have rushed to judgment. You need to call off the dogs. Period. Publicly and swiftly.”

[...]

The letter also described how Zimmerman was one of “very few” in Sanford, Fla., who spoke out publicly to condemn the “beating of the black homeless man Sherman Ware on December 4, 2010 by the son of a Sanford police officer.”

“Do you know the individual that stepped up when no one else in the black community would?” the family member wrote. “Do you know who spent tireless hours putting flyers on the cars of persons parked in the churches of the black community? Do you know who waited for the church-goers to get out of church so that he could hand them fliers in an attempt to organize the black community against this horrible miscarriage of justice? Do you know who helped organize the City Hall meeting on January 8th, 2011 at Sanford City Hall??”

“That person was GEORGE ZIMMERMAN. Ironic isn’t it?”

(Boyle, 2012a)

As seen here, the blog piece quotes the letter in describing “how Zimmerman was one of ‘very few’ in Sanford, Fla., who spoke out publicly to condemn the ‘beating of the black homeless man Sherman Ware on December 4, 2010 by the son of a Sanford police officer.’” The account of Zimmerman’s actions, which are directly quoted from the letter in the blog piece, takes the form of a series of “do you know” questions. The syntactic parallelism in this series of questions provides a rhetorical frame for encapsulating those past actions, and leads up to the denouement of the small story where the identity of George Zimmerman is revealed as the author of those actions.

The blog piece, in line with the original letter, maintains the stylistic use of all caps for Zimmerman’s name at the end of the homeless man account. The revelation of Zimmerman’s identity is then followed by the tag question, “Ironic isn’t it?” Through this tag question, the dominant understanding of racism punctuates the end of the small story. To find the account ironic, one must accept the dominant ideology’s either/or binary that forces individuals into *either* the role of a “racist” or a virtuous non-racist. According to this logic, the account given of Zimmerman’s virtuous acts positions him in the latter category, and thereby eliminates him as a candidate for the former category.

To escape the image of a “racist” provided by the framework of the dominant ideology, much of the discourse in defense of Zimmerman centered on a version of what Bonilla-Silva (2013) has termed the “anything but race strategy” (62). This appeared in the frequent refrain uttered by Zimmerman’s supporters that *race had nothing to do with the incident*. After all, to acknowledge that race may have had something to do with Zimmerman’s actions could open the door to affirming Zimmerman was a “racist” per the rules of the hunting for “racists” language game. Therefore, a great deal of discursive energy

was put into denying that race had anything to do with the incident. You may recall that media attention focused intently on the hoodie that Trayvon Martin wore on the night he was killed where the hoodie was allowed to stand in as a proxy for race. If Zimmerman found Trayvon suspicious because of the hoodie (and not race per se); then he could likewise escape the “racist” branding put forth by the dominant understanding of racism.

Another defensive move identified by [Bonilla-Silva \(2013\)](#) is the rhetorical tool of projection where the tables are turned so that those who do recognize a racial dimension to an incident “are the racist ones” (63). As [Bonilla-Silva \(2013\)](#) points out, many respondents in his study “projected racism or racial motivations onto blacks and other minorities as a way of avoiding responsibility and feeling good about themselves” (64). A similar strategy appears in the second paragraph of the blog piece. Here, the letter writer, in addressing the NAACP, includes the organization under the umbrella phrase “the rest of the racists.” The letter writer’s point seems to be that those who have voiced concern about the role of race and racism in Zimmerman’s killing of Trayvon Martin, including the NAACP and its allies, are the real “racists.” This charge of “‘reverse racism’ is often used to turn reality on its head,” as [Spears \(1999: 22\)](#) writes. Here, it is used to deflect the accusation against Zimmerman by removing him from the “racist” category through a move of substitution. Since the rules of the language game only allow for two distinct subject positions—“racists” or non-racists—substitution allows speakers to rearrange the subjects put into those positions.

On April 4, a few days after the initial blog posting, The Daily Caller website posted a follow-up piece ([Boyle, 2012b](#)), and Sean Hannity made reference to the story in his interview with George Zimmerman’s father that evening (seen earlier). The social life of the homeless man story lived on in the conservative blogosphere, including a subsequent reference on May 24 on the [Breitbart Blog \(2012\)](#).

4.3. *The ideological work of small stories as intertextual series*

As a defense against the accusations of being a “racist,” these small stories fit neatly into the either/or binary set up by the assumptions of the dominant ideology. In the hunting for “racists” language game that proceeds from those assumptions, individuals can either be cast as “racists” or non-racists. There is no room for recognizing the collective and systemic dimensions of racism that everyone contributes to in subtle ways. For example, the way racial stereotypes become part of internalized understandings that bias habitual interactions are ignored. One is either identified as a backward, uneducated “racist” in the image of a Ku Klux Klan member or as a virtuous individual entirely free of racism.

This creates ready-made character roles into which individuals can be cast. For Zimmerman to be labeled a “racist” in line with the first of these ready-made character roles, he must be shown to have acted with overt racial animus. Insofar as it could be shown he uttered a racist slur on the night he killed Trayvon, his racist credentials per the logic of the dominant ideology could be established. Likewise, to defend him against that racist accusation requires positioning him in the opposite character role. After all, the roles are clear cut and one can only fulfill a single role per the dominant ideology’s grand narrative. If Zimmerman is shown to be helpful to African Americans, then it can be refuted that he is hateful.

Another way of viewing these intertextually related “small stories” is in terms of what [Van Dijk \(1993:134\)](#) has termed “second-order stories.” These second-order stories about Zimmerman are inserted “on top of (or ‘below’)” the primary story about the shooting. Although in many ways unrelated to the immediate events that took place on the night Zimmerman killed Martin, the small stories about Zimmerman as a tutor and as an advocate for the homeless man work to construct the character role he plays within that larger narrative about the shooting. The smaller, second-order stories effectively impose intentional states and motives upon his actions within that larger narrative, which is built to a large extent upon the generic framework provided by the dominant ideology with its ready-made character slots of “racists” and virtuous non-racists. In this way, as [Bruner \(1991\)](#) points out, “the particulars of narratives are tokens of broader types” (6). The dominant ideology provides the ready-made images of the broader social types. As speakers position Zimmerman into either one or the other of those roles, those ideological assumptions are thereby reinforced. In other words, the ideological assumptions about racism are both presupposed and reproduced within the confines of the language game, which unfolds across multiple interactional contexts where the circulation of the small stories as intertextual series contributes to the process.

5. Ostracizing “Racists” and advancing white virtue

In contrast to the discursive energy put forth to defend individuals like George Zimmerman within the hunting for “racists” language game, many of the same voices quickly took on the role of accusers against Donald Sterling and Cliven Bundy. Below, I examine the way accusatory moves work to construct the accused as tokens of a broader type in line with the image of the prototypical “racist” discussed earlier. Speakers can use that image to isolate racism within the accused individuals while simultaneously minimizing racism as a systemic problem. Along with this negative other-presentation is the converse process of positive self-presentation ([Van Dijk, 1998: 267](#)) whereby speakers stake claim to an anti-racist stance, using their condemnatory remarks to index a desirable, morally righteous identity. Within the hunting for “racists” language game, this positive self-presentation forwards what [Feagin \(2010\)](#) and [Hill \(2008\)](#) term “white virtue.” As I illustrate, the end effect is to protect white privilege rather than to dismantle racism.

5.1. Positioning “Racists” as societal outliers

Within the hunting for “racists” language game, speakers draw upon a spatiotemporal frame—that is, a chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981)—to position the “racist” character type in a distinct world removed from contemporary society. The notion of the chronotope, as introduced by Bakhtin (1981) and taken up by sociocultural linguists (e.g. Basso, 1996; Agha, 2007; Dick, 2010; Koven, 2013), indicates the way temporal and spatial relationships become fused within narratives. “Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation” (Bakhtin, 1981: 7). In the dominant ideology’s grand narrative about racism, “racists” are positioned as societal outliers by framing them as spatiotemporally removed from the current historical context. Accordingly, “racists” become relics of a past period of US history, with the prototypical image being the Ku Klux Klan member representative of Jim Crow racism in the South. Likewise, the image of the Archie Bunker type bigot is seen as generationally removed from the current here-and-now. Such social types are seen as holding views that are outdated and ignorant. As Hill (2008) describes, they are viewed as “uneducated, marginal, and backward individuals” (62–63). In other words, they are societal outliers and are therefore positioned as such through descriptors that emphasize ignorance and their generational remove from contemporary society.

The following exchange between Fox News host Sean Hannity and a guest on his show illustrates the positioning of accused “racists” as ignorant. The exchange comes during a discussion of Donald Sterling.

Hannity, Fox News 10:00 PM EST, Monday, April 24, 2014

Sean Hannity discusses Donald Sterling with guests that include author Gavin McInnes.

Hannity: Don’t you find racist people ignorant?

McInnes: Of course, we all do.

This perspective is further illustrated in the examples below, which are all instances of the way Donald Sterling is variously described in the media after his remarks. I have highlighted descriptors in bold that deal with ignorance.

...an **ignorant racist** putz in the first degree.

(Dr. Drew, CNN, Tuesday, April 29, 2014)

He’s a **complete idiot** and he’s also a **racist**.

(CNN Newsroom, Saturday, April 26, 2014)

...just flat-out **ignorant**.

(CNN Newsroom, Sunday, April 27, 2014)

...an **idiot** who says something **stupid**.

(The Five, Fox News, Tuesday, April 29, 2014)

The association of racism with ignorance is well represented by the common collocation “ignorant racist,” seen above. The other descriptions provide variations on this theme. According to the dominant ideological perspective, to be a “racist” is to be ignorant. As Bonilla-Silva (1997) describes, this is “the logical outcome of defining racism as a belief” (476). If an individual says bigoted things, the assumption is that they must believe those things due to a lack of knowledge or education. The solution to overcoming racism, according to this perspective, is to educate such individuals so that they can become enlightened members of society. This implies a dichotomy between the uneducated “racists” and the rest of society, positioning the “racists” as outliers in a society where the majority presumably gets racism (qua bigotry), abhors it, and has nothing to do with it.

As seen in the following example, the focus on beliefs can extend beyond knowledge to encompass the individual’s mental state.

He is an **old crazy racist**.

(The O’Reilly Factor, Fox News, Wednesday, April 30, 2014)

The collocation “crazy racist” further cements his status as a societal outlier through a distinction between his mental state and that of other members of the society. Likewise, the additional modifier “old” furthers the idea that “racists” inhabit a chronotope of the there-and-then, which is removed from the contemporary here-and-now. This is further demonstrated in the following example.

...we are looking at an incredibly lost **ignorant old guy**...

(CNN Tonight, Wednesday, May 14, 2014)

Here, the descriptor “ignorant” collocates with “old” to complete the banishment from contemporary society. This idea that “racists” belong to a previous generation received substantial discussion in the media fallout surrounding Sterling’s remarks. The perspective is well-represented in a comment made by V. Stiviano, the person who recorded and released Sterling’s remarks to the media, in an interview with journalist Barbara Walters. Below is the recontextualization of Stiviano’s comment on CNN.

CNN Special Reports 10:00 PM EST, Monday, May 5, 2014

A clip of an interview that ABC's Barbara Walters did with V. Stiviano.

Stiviano: I think Mr. Sterling is from a different generation than I am. I thought he was brought up to believe those things.

Walters: What things?

Stiviano: Segregation, whites and blacks.

Here, Stiviano characterizes Sterling as being “from a different generation” in which “he was brought up to believe” in a way that differs from contemporary beliefs about race and racism. As this perspective circulates in the media, it plays upon the notion that “racists” are simply Archie Bunker types—that is, relics of the past that have nothing to do with contemporary society.

The positioning of individual “racists” as societal outliers performs ideological work as it isolates racism in these individual outliers and thereby preserves the notion that racism is no longer a substantial societal problem. Fox News hosts Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly express this view in the two excerpts that follow.

Hannity, Fox News 10:00 PM EST, Monday, April 29, 2014

Sean Hannity discusses Donald Sterling with guests.

Hannity: I look at this as an anomaly.

O'Reilly Factor, Fox News, 8:00 PM EST, Wednesday, April 30, 2014

Bill O'Reilly discusses Donald Sterling with guests.

O'Reilly: There is no question that Sterling has a problem. But here is the headline: it's primarily his problem, not the country's problem. He is shameful, but does not represent anyone other than himself.

Hannity characterizes the case “as an anomaly,” and O'Reilly denies that racism is a problem that impacts the nation as a whole. Rather, the problem is characterized as one isolated to this now-marginalized figure against the backdrop of a supposedly colorblind or post-racial society. This focus on locating racism solely in individual outliers therefore goes hand in hand with what [Bonilla-Silva \(2013\)](#) describes as the “minimization of racism.” The dominant ideology minimizes racism by “regarding discrimination exclusively as all-out racist behavior” and by suggesting that “discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances” ([Bonilla-Silva, 2013](#): 29). According to this perspective, if racism merely exists in visibly racist actions carried out by individuals and those individuals are societal outliers; then the view that society as a whole has moved beyond racism can be preserved.

5.2. *Claiming an anti-racist stance*

Like Donald Sterling, Cliven Bundy's remarks indexed his own racist stance and therefore fueled his other-ascription as a “racist” categorically removed from the rest of the society. Like Sterling, speakers distanced themselves from Bundy within the hunting for “racists” language game, but the need to discursively create this distance became all the more urgent for several prominent conservative figures who had been giving Bundy vocal support in his standoff with the federal government. Politicians on that list include Republican Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, a nationally recognized figure within the Tea Party movement, and Republican Senator Dean Heller of Nevada, Bundy's home state. Bundy's elevation as a cause célèbre had been fueled in part by the positive coverage he received on Fox News, along with support from media personalities such as Sean Hannity. But once Bundy's racist remarks were published in *The New York Times* and entered into the national media discourse, those same supporters quickly denounced the remarks in statements that distanced themselves from Bundy. Below is an excerpt of a statement made by Hannity in reaction to Bundy's remarks.

Hannity, Fox News 10:00 PM EST, Thursday, April 24, 2014

Sean Hannity makes the following statement after playing a video clip of Bundy's remarks.

Hannity: All right, allow me to make myself abundantly clear. I believe those comments are downright racist, they are repugnant, they are bigoted, and it's beyond disturbing. I find those comments to be deplorable, and I think it's extremely unfortunate that Cliven Bundy holds those views. Now, while I supported the Bundy Ranch as they took a stand against the Bureau of Land Management, I was absolutely dismayed and frankly disappointed after reading the article and then hearing the commentary.

Hannity's statement condemns Bundy's remarks in strong terms, using several descriptors to indicate moral distaste—“downright racist,” “repugnant,” “bigoted,” “beyond disturbing,” “deplorable.” In contradistinction to the way racist remarks index a racist stance when spoken by individuals like Bundy or Sterling, comments that decry racist remarks index an anti-racist stance. Given the general and widespread condemnation of overt forms of racism within society, an anti-racist stance is seen as a desirable position for anyone to take—even those, like Hannity, who advocate a colorblind ideology

that otherwise minimizes systemic forms of racism. Echoing Hannity's statement to distance himself from Bundy, conservative media pundit Glenn Beck likewise urged other conservatives to end their relationship with Bundy. "You've got to distance yourself," Beck exhorted (Topaz, 2014). Through the either/or binary set up by the hunting for "racists" language game, speakers are able to do just that by taking on the accusatory role to separate themselves from the societal outliers.

The practice of differentiation encouraged by the hunting for "racists" language game is similar to what Hill (2009) terms "decoding racism" (Reyes, 2011: 462). By decoding instances of obvious racism, speakers can position themselves as morally righteous individuals. As Hill (2008) describes, by "recognizing a 'racist' or in identifying 'racism,' a White person shows herself to be a good person" (45). This distancing and separating allows those who otherwise benefit from white privilege to remain in the "safe" category in the either/or binary of "racists" versus non-racists set up by the dominant ideology. As Hill (2008) describes, the underlying logic goes something like this: "I am a good and normal mainstream sort of White person. I am not a racist, because racists are bad and marginal people" (180). The type of decoding involved in the hunting for "racists" language game therefore protects white innocence and forwards white virtue (Hill, 2008; Feagin, 2010).

White innocence and virtue, as explained by Feagin (2010), buttresses systemic racism by denying "the seriousness of antiblack racism in the past and present history of the United States" (82). It provides another avenue for the minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) even while ostensibly denouncing racism. To be clear, it denounces only certain forms of racism—namely, individual bigotry—while denying the role that collective racism plays in structuring society and unequally distributing benefits. Racial disparity and discrimination can be blamed on a few individual outliers rather than the small roles everyone plays in sustaining the system as a whole.

The hunting for "racists" language game therefore does ideological work by sowing what Mills' (2008) terms *white ignorance*. White ignorance is a type of ignorance that fails or refuses to recognize the ongoing structural and institutional aspects of systemic racism that reinforce white privilege. Mills (2008) emphasizes that the term "'white' in 'white ignorance' does not mean that it has to be confined to white people" (234). Rather, the term is meant to indicate "the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved" in positioning whites as a privileged group in the racialized hierarchy (234). The benefits and privileges associated with being at the top of the racial hierarchy in US society often go unnoticed while the racism experienced by people of color, as Bonilla-Silva (2013) shows, is minimized. Therefore, the concept of white ignorance conveys a type of ideological ignorance spread by the hunting for "racists" language game as it narrows the definition of racism and elides a systemic understanding from the discourse.

6. Conclusion

As a subset of race talk, the hunting for "racists" language game provides a framework for talking about racism that accords with the dominant ideological perspective. That perspective narrowly conceptualizes racism in individualist terms so that racism only exists in visible actions, such as hateful words uttered by bigots. As such, the broader critical conception of racism as a system of power remains hidden along with the less visible manifestations of racism that continue to structure society around white privilege.

The two sets of cases examined in the analysis differ in important ways. On the surface, the case of George Zimmerman's alleged slur appears similar to the racist remarks uttered by Donald Sterling and Cliven Bundy. All of the cases involve instances where racist words instigate the discursive positioning of individuals as "racists." However, as the analysis shows, the alacrity with which many prominent figures jumped on the anti-racist bandwagon in the cases of Sterling and Bundy contrasts sharply with the substantial discursive work put forth by many of those same figures to defend George Zimmerman against the same charges. What accounts for this difference? Why were the two sets of cases approached differently by conservative figures that espouse a colorblind or post-racial vision of society?

One answer points to the ambiguous nature of the alleged slur attributed to Zimmerman versus the unambiguous nature of the remarks made by Sterling and Bundy. On the one hand, Zimmerman denied uttering an offensive slur and the audio recording of his 911 call received extensive analysis in the media to decide whether the sound could even be determined to be a slur. This drawn-out accusatory process in Zimmerman's case, along with his own denials, impelled supporters to make exculpatory countermoves within the language game. On the other hand, the authorship and clarity of the remarks made by both Sterling and Bundy were widely recognized. Neither denied saying the words. Especially in the case of Bundy, this made it easy even for his vocal supporters to turn against him and condemn him for the remarks.

The most important difference, however, deals with the originating spark that ignited these cases as racial events—that is, as triggers for public discussion about race and racism. The focus on Zimmerman's alleged slur arose after he shot dead Trayvon Martin, and it was the shooting death—rather than the slur per se—that constituted the racial event. In the cases of Sterling and Bundy, the racist remarks themselves formed the immediate triggers for public reactions. In Zimmerman's case, the racial dimensions of his shooting of Trayvon Martin were highly contested by his supporters. In the public discourse that ensued, his supporters, including media personalities such as Sean Hannity, voiced the colorblind refrain that *race had nothing to do with the incident*. Undergirding this perspective is the dominant ideological perspective that racism only exists in overt acts of malice against people of color motivated by personal bigotry and animus. This perspective does not recognize as racism the subtle way implicit biases guide how young black men are viewed when walking through a neighborhood at night. Nor does this perspective recognize as racism the way institutional biases guide how police afford shooters of young black men the benefit of the doubt, in line with historical patterns of racial injustice in US society. Rather, according to the dominant ideological perspective, the only way race or racism could have anything to do with Zimmerman's actions would be if

Zimmerman were a “racist” in line with the archetypal image associated with that character role. Guided by this ideology, the media’s intense focus on the alleged slur attempted to provide meaning to the incident in line with this conception of racism. Likewise, as supporters responded to the accusatory salvos in the hunting for “racists” language game, they further reinscribed the dominant conceptions of racism as evidenced from the ideological work done by the small stories they employed.

Perhaps if a slur had fully materialized in Zimmerman’s case—as clear and unambiguously spoken as the words of Sterling and Bundy—then even his supporters would have been compelled to label him a “racist” and acknowledge that race had something to do with the incident. But in such a hypothetical turn of events, the branding of Zimmerman as a “racist” and accompanying acknowledgment that race had something to do with the incident would be ideologically sanctioned by the dominant ideology. That is, the dominant ideological image of a “racist” would more easily be fulfilled, as it was in the case of Sterling and Bundy. But lacking such an ideologically sanctioned interpretation of events, at stake in Zimmerman’s defense remained more than just the defense of Zimmerman as an individual. At stake was the defense of the dominant ideological perspective that race had nothing to do with the incident, which hinged on absolving Zimmerman of being a “racist” within the hunting for “racists” language game.

In other words, what ultimately separates Zimmerman’s case from those of Sterling and Bundy, I argue, is the way Zimmerman’s case qua “racial event” potentially threatens the stability of the dominant ideology’s colorblind narrative. This is because the larger underlying debate centered on the question of whether race had anything to do with the incident. In the absence of clear evidence to label Zimmerman a “racist,” the defense of Zimmerman within the hunting for “racists” language game had as much to do with defending the larger ideological perspective that race was irrelevant to the incident. The defensive moves made by Zimmerman’s supporters within the framework of that language game can be seen as not just moves to defend him as an individual, but to defend the dominant ideological perspective and its narrow understanding of racism. To the extent that the framework of the hunting for “racists” language game itself narrows the meaning of racism, simply shifting the debate to within its bounds aids that perspective.

Beyond the differences, what all the cases have in common is the way the dominant ideological perspective on racism is enacted and reproduced through the hunting for “racists” language game. The language game therefore displaces critically informed discussion on racism by narrowly isolating what counts as racism. Moreover, this displacement is obfuscated by pointing to the ostensibly anti-racist moves made within the language game, allowing the game to masquerade as productive anti-racist discourse. The NBA’s response to Donald Sterling is a case in point. Although the response was swift and positive, it is important to recognize that the NBA only acted after Sterling’s racism manifested itself as racist words recorded in a taped phone conversation. Yet, as many pointed out in reactions to the incident, Sterling’s role in perpetuating institutional racism had already been well documented. Over the previous decade, he had faced two separate lawsuits for race-based housing discrimination and a third lawsuit for employment discrimination. However, the NBA did not act to remove him from the league after those incidents, nor did those incidents result in a media frenzy. That inaction seems to belie the power of the dominant ideological perspective to shape and constrain the discourse surrounding racism in US society. The only type of racism that truly seems to matter—the so-called “real racism” for many Americans—is the narrowly defined racism of individual bigotry as it manifests itself in visibly racist words. Through strategic emphases and omissions (Spears, 1999: 30), the ideology that guides much mainstream media discourse simply ignores or elides from discussion the more complex forms of institutional and systemic racism more central to maintaining the racial status quo.

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