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Hunting for “Racists”: Tape Fetishism and the Intertextual Enactment and Reproduction of the Dominant Understanding of Racism in US Society

The dominant racial ideology in US society narrowly conceptualizes racism as individual bigotry. This conception is enacted and legitimated through a type of language game that recontextualizes prior words to invoke evidence of an individual’s racist credentials. This paper examines the way CNN journalists engage in this language game as they recontextualize the 911 call made by George Zimmerman before he killed Trayvon Martin in 2012. The analysis illustrates how the recontextualization works to enact and reproduce the dominant ideological perspective on racism by establishing intertextual authority and engaging a wider audience in the “hunting for ‘racists’” language game. [ideology, intertextual authority, language game, language ideologies, professional hearing, racism, recontextualization, stance, tape fetishism]

Introduction

Popular sentiment, especially as expressed by many white Americans, holds that US society has somehow moved beyond race, and by implication, racism. Most white Americans publicly denounce racism, and view the Jim Crow era as a historical period that America left behind in favor of a new era where racism has supposedly declined in significance (Feagin 2010:14). Yet as minorities and race scholars widely recognize, racism remains a formidable issue in a US society that remains very much racially structured. But today, the overt racism of the Jim Crow era has given way to a new form of “color-blind” racism (Bonilla-Silva 2013) that operates more subtly and covertly than in the past. As many scholars have shown, language plays an important role in perpetuating racism as a collective system that continues to structure society around white privilege while denying the persistence of “systemic racism” (Feagin 2010). In this paper, I explore the way “everyday discursive practices” (Hill 2008) facilitate the enactment and reproduction of the dominant racial ideology in US society by examining mainstream media discourse after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. In particular, the discourse that surrounds this “racial event” (Doane 2006) enacts and reproduces the dominant ideology’s conceptualization of

racism as limited in scope—namely, as confined to individual bigotry and overt animus.

The analysis probes the intertextual practices used by cable news journalists to recontextualize a portion of a 911 call made by George Zimmerman on the night he killed Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman was a neighborhood watch volunteer who saw Martin walking through his neighborhood in Sanford, Florida, in February 2012. After calling 911 to report what he described as a "suspicious guy" wearing a hoodie, Zimmerman continued to follow Martin. A confrontation ensued, and Martin was shot dead by Zimmerman. After the tape of Zimmerman's 911 call was made public, many believed that Zimmerman could be heard uttering a racist slur under his breath, even though the quality of the tape made it extremely difficult to decipher what words were spoken, if any. By engaging in a form of what Ashmore and colleagues (2004) term "tape fetishism," journalists recontextualized the tape with various audio enhancements and metapragmatic framings in an effort to uncover the "true" words uttered by Zimmerman. In doing so, they engaged in a binary debate over his racist credentials as they attempted to ascribe a clear-cut motivation for the killing. I claim that this tape fetishism contributes to the practice of what Bonilla-Silva (2013) terms "hunting for 'racists,'" an exercise that reduces racism to individual bigotry and overt animus while ignoring its collective, systemic, and institutional dimensions. Hunting for racists thus ultimately serves to maintain the dominant racial structure by simplifying the complex dimensions of racism—from the implicit biases bound up in issues of racial profiling to the historical patterns of racial bias exhibited by police departments and the criminal justice system in failing to prosecute or convict the killers of unarmed black men.

The analytic focus on intertextuality in this paper draws from the widely shared view among sociocultural linguists that intertextual practices "yield social formations" (Agha 2005:4) and facilitate the discursive exercise of power (Briggs and Bauman 1992). In line with this perspective, scholarship has examined the production of intertextual authority in reported speech (Matoesian 2000) and the politics of entextualization (Bucholtz 2000, 2009) and recontextualization (Hodges 2008). Related scholarship has also focused on the ideological role of the media used in these processes; in particular "tape fetishism" (Ashmore et al. 2004), whereby audiotapes are "reified and fetishized as an objective source of knowledge" (Matoesian 2013:649), and the "professional hearing" practices that position experts as authoritative transmitters of previously spoken words (Bucholtz 2009; Matoesian 2000). Overall, a focus on the intertextual dimensions of discourse affords researchers "a vantage point on social formations larger than those of the immediate interaction order, and [gives us] ways of thinking of power and authority in discourse-based terms larger than those that are immediately and locally produced in the bounded speech event (interactional power)" (Bauman 2005:146).

This analysis focuses on the way intertextual practices contribute to the enactment and reproduction of the current racial structure in US society. Bonilla-Silva (2013:9) defines *racial structure* as "the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege." He then notes that "the task of analysts interested in studying racial structures is to uncover the particular social, economic, political, social control, and ideological mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege in a society" (9). The analysis that follows shines a light on the specific linguistic practices involved in the enactment and reproduction of the dominant ideological assumptions about racism. In doing so, it builds upon prior work on intertextuality in discourse (e.g., Agha and Wortham 2005), as well as social theoretical concepts forwarded by race scholars (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2013; Feagin 2006, 2010), to contribute to the current literature on language, race and racism (e.g., Alim and Reyes 2011; Alim and Smitherman 2012; Barrett 2006; Bucholtz and Trechter 2001; Dick and Wirtz 2011; Hill 2008; Hodges 2015, 2016).

The primary data used in the analysis come from two episodes of the CNN news show, *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees* (henceforth, AC360). Both episodes occurred soon after George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin in February 2012. The first episode appeared on March 21, and the second on April 4. Central to both episodes is the *recontextualization* of parts of the 911 call made by Zimmerman before he shot Martin. As one of the three major cable news channels in the United States, CNN is widely viewed as a politically mainstream media outlet, flanked on the left by MSNBC and on the right by the decidedly conservative Fox News. Yet unlike much of the prime-time programming on MSNBC and Fox News, CNN tends to focus less on political commentary and more on traditional investigative journalism. AC360 is representative of this focus. The show, hosted by the widely respected and award-winning journalist Anderson Cooper, aims to provide in-depth coverage of the most important news stories of the day. Analyzing CNN's coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting thus offers important insight into the way commonplace ideas about race and racism figure into much mainstream "racial discourse" (Doane 2006). Of particular interest is the way CNN journalists enact and reproduce the dominant racial ideology even as they ostensibly convey a position against racism.

Before moving into a close analysis of the discourse surrounding the slur on the AC360 episodes, I first provide a theoretical overview of the assumptions associated with the dominant racial ideology in US society. The analysis itself then illustrates how the recontextualizations of the 911 call work to enact and reproduce the dominant ideological perspective on racism by framing the tape in binary terms, employing *professional hearing practices* to produce intertextual authority, and taking stances in relation to the words on the tape to engage a wider audience in the "hunting for 'racists'" language game.

Tape Fetishism and the Hunting for "Racists"

A *racial ideology*, as defined by Bonilla-Silva (2013:9), comprises "the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify . . . or challenge . . . the racial status quo." This conception views ideology in neutral terms—that is, as a system of ideas and representations that guides social actors as they "make sense of, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (Hall 1996:26). Nevertheless, as Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony makes clear, "the frameworks of the dominant race tend to become the master frameworks upon which all racial actors ground (for or against) their ideological positions" (Bonilla-Silva 2013:9).

The dominant ideological framework that guides thinking about race and racism in US society is well-represented in Hill's (2008) description of the "folk theory of race and racism." Central to this dominant perspective is the reduction of racism to individual bigotry or racially motivated animus. Racism, therefore, becomes "entirely a matter of individual beliefs, intentions, and actions" (Hill 2008:6). This perspective rationalizes the activity of "hunting for 'racists'" which involves "the careful separation of good and bad, tolerant and intolerant Americans" (Bonilla-Silva 2013:15). Individual "racists" are identified by overtly racist behaviors and actions, such as the use of racial slurs and epithets (Hill 2008). In this way, the question of whether or not George Zimmerman uttered a racial slur during his 911 call before killing Trayvon Martin became central to the way the dominant ideology connected racism to the incident.

The media's intense focus on the 911 tape enabled the "hunting for 'racists'" exercise through "tape fetishism," where the audiotape is positioned "as a direct and evidential record of a past event, and thus as a quasi-magical time machine" (Ashmore et al. 2004:349). This time machine promises to transport listeners back to the moment before Zimmerman killed Martin on the night of February 26, 2012, and supposedly provide independent access to that now vanished scene. The fetishization

of the tape works to reify the tape as the holder of the capital T "truth" about Zimmerman's "individual psychological dispositions" (Bonilla-Silva 2013:7) on that night, and hence, according to the assumptions of the dominant racial ideology, his racist intent.

The premise that the tape contains words that act as packages of meaning that can provide direct access into Zimmerman's mind is undergirded by the language ideologies of referentialism (Silverstein 1976) and personalism (Hill 2008, Rosaldo 1982). Referentialism's concern with the informational dimension of language bolsters the idea that words are merely conveyors of prepackaged meaning, as Reddy (1979) points out in his critique of the conduit metaphor. In this way, the tape as a "quasi-magical time machine" is the holder of words that act as "time capsules." Along with referentialism, the language ideology of personalism further positions those words as a record of the speaker's mind-set. This follows from personalism's view that "linguistic meaning comes from the beliefs and intentions of the speaker" (Hill 2008:38; see also Duranti 1993; Hill 2000; Rosaldo 1982). As Hill (2008:65) writes, 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." Therefore, such words, according to the language ideology of personalism, provide important evidence for identifying an individual as a "racist" or not.

To summarize, tape fetishism along with these linguistic ideologies serve the dominant racial ideology's interest in "hunting for 'racists'" by using the words as potential evidence of Zimmerman's "racist" credentials. This language game in identifying individuals as either "racists" or nonracists, which dominates much race talk in US society, builds upon the dominant racial ideology's definition of racism in individualist terms, and overshadows the complexities of systemic racism. The interactional work seen in the analysis that follows therefore centers on the question of whether Zimmerman uttered a racist slur.

Recontextualization of George Zimmerman's 911 Call

The Tape Playbacks

On the night of February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman spotted Trayvon Martin walking through his neighborhood in Sanford, Florida, and made a 911 call to the Sanford Police Department. The call lasted just over four minutes and consisted of the dispatcher gathering information from Zimmerman. When the audio of this call was publicly released, questions began circulating around whether Zimmerman could be heard uttering a racial slur on the tape. The section of the tape in question involves an apparent aside uttered by Zimmerman under his breath. Due to wind and other background noise, it is difficult to even recognize the sound as an utterance, let alone clearly make out words.

In an effort to uncover what exactly was said on the tape, Anderson Cooper's show on CNN (AC360) dedicated a portion of the March 21 episode to the topic. In particular, the show featured a pre-recorded video of CNN correspondent Gary Tuchman in a special sound room with audio engineer Rick Sierra. In the sound room, Tuchman and Sierra play various permutations of the 911 call while attempting to isolate and enhance the segment believed to be a racial slur. Parts of this sound room episode were replayed on AC360's March 26 show and then again on the April 4 show. On the April 4 show, correspondent Gary Tuchman revisited the 911 tape in a second sound room, this time working with audio engineer Brian Stone to further enhance and isolate the disputed segment of the 911 call. Excerpt 1 is taken from the sound room session during the March 21 show.¹

1. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, MARCH 21, 2012)

- TUCHMAN: Rick if you ca:n I have not listened to this portion of the 911 tape at all. I just want to hear it raw right now if you can play maybe ten seconds before it and let's listen.
- SIERRA: Okay.
((tape starts))
- ZIMMERMAN: Down towards the um (.) other entrance of the neighborhood.
- DISPATCHER: Okay. Which entrance is that that he's heading towards?
(.)
- ZIMMERMAN: The back entrance. (3.0) (.....)
((tape stops))
- TUCHMAN: ((in pre-recorded voice-over)) You may not have heard the moment in question. Because it was so quick.
- TUCHMAN: ((back in sound room)) How long does that portion last that everyone's talking about?
- SIERRA: A second eighteen frames.
- TUCHMAN: A second eighteen frames. So that's about one point six seconds?
- SIERRA: Correct.
- TUCHMAN: So let's listen to it like ten times in a row if we can.
- SIERRA: Okay.
- TUCHMAN: ((in pre-recorded voice-over)) What we're listening for is the racial slur coons. It follows the F word. Some people say they hear it. Others say they don't.
- TAPE: (..) (..) (..) ((segment in question plays 3 times with a slight pause between, lasting about 7 seconds))

During the March 21 show, the tape is revisited four times during the sound room session; two of those playbacks are featured in excerpt 1. The first playback, which begins near the beginning of excerpt 1, is notable because it represents the longest continuous playback of the tape during the March 21 show: a 12-second portion of the 911 call played without interruption or repetition. This playback includes sufficient co-text surrounding the segment featuring the alleged slur so that listeners can recognize the question/answer routine between Zimmerman and the 911 dispatcher. After Zimmerman responds to the dispatcher's question, there is a three second pause and then a difficult-to-decipher utterance, most likely an aside uttered by Zimmerman under his breath but evidently not directed at the dispatcher. I have represented this with empty parentheses in the transcription.

Against the backdrop of the question/answer routine, the incomprehensibility and brevity of the segment in question becomes strikingly apparent. Other than this relatively long 12-second playback on the March 21 show or the playback of this same 12-second clip on the April 4 show, the rest of the playbacks on both shows feature various isolations of the 1.6-second segment under scrutiny, repeated over and over. This is illustrated in the second playback of the tape at the end of excerpt 1 where the segment that includes what are thought to be two words is replayed three times with a slight pause between playbacks. Similarly, the third playback on the March 21 show replays the (presumed) two words five times in quick succession, lasting about eight seconds in duration; and the fourth playback features only the second word (the alleged slur) played five times over a duration of about six seconds.

The recontextualization of the tape on the April 4 show proceeds in a similar manner, revisiting the tape a total of six times. The first playback on April 4 features a repetition of the final playback from the March 21 show. The second playback then features a newly enhanced version of the 12-second clip featured in excerpt 1, while the remaining four playbacks isolate shorter segments (corresponding to one or two words) and repeat those segments in succession for up to eleven seconds at a time.

Framing the Tape Playback in Binary Terms

In placing the tape at the center of the unfolding discourse surrounding the incident, the tape itself is positioned as an objective source of knowledge that holds definitive proof of whether or not Zimmerman is indeed a "racist." If only one could clearly decipher what the tape holds, one could determine the answer once and for all. As the tape is recontextualized on the news shows, the journalists discursively frame the tape as the holder of this "truth" about Zimmerman while positioning themselves simply as transmitters of what the tape holds (rather than as active shapers of the tape's contents and meaning).

In the excerpts that follow, CNN hosts Anderson Cooper and Wolf Blitzer introduce the portion of the shows on March 21 (Cooper) and April 4 (Blitzer) that feature the 911 tape.

2. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, MARCH 21, 2012)

COOPER: Up close tonight what George Zimmerman said or did not say in a 911 call that he made moment- moments before he shot Trayvon Martin. Did he use (.) a racist slur? The- there's a big debate raging over two words that Zimmerman used in the call or may have used. Some hear an ugly racial insult and an expletive, others hear nothing of the sort.

Central to the "hunting for 'racists'" language game is the binary distinction between the good and the bad, the racists and the nonracists. Importantly, the lead-ins to the sound room sessions frame the debate in terms of this binary, setting up an either-or choice for listeners. At issue, in Cooper's words (in excerpt 2), is "what George Zimmerman said or did not say." Parallel to this either-or choice are Cooper's remarks that follow a few lines later: "Some hear an ugly racial insult. . . others hear nothing of the sort." Through these parallel utterances, the debate is framed in binary terms, mirroring the dominant ideology's binary conceptualization of racism.

This binary framing is supported by the assumptions underlying tape fetishism, which "claim that *any* listener could in principle hear what actually went on at the time the tape was made" (Ashmore et al. 2004:355). This can be seen in the following excerpt from Cooper's lead-in to the sound room session on his March 21 show.

3. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, MARCH 21, 2012)

COOPER: Now before we tell you what the alleged slur (.) is, we're going to let you listen for yourself with fresh ears and make up your own mind what you hear. For that we enlisted the help of one of CNN's top audio engineers.

In this statement, the role of the journalists and audio engineers is backgrounded and the viewers' own capability of uncovering what is on the tape is emphasized. In this way, the tape holds the power "to transport the listener directly to the original event" (Ashmore et al. 2004:355). Below, I say more about the role played by the audio engineers in enabling this sort of time travel across interactional contexts; but for now the key point is that despite the effort put into cleaning up the tape, the role played by the journalists and audio engineers in shaping its reception within the context of the news program is ultimately erased. After all, according to the ideological assumptions that accompany this interactional routine, the tape is viewed as speaking for itself—that is, as a self-evident record of the past that viewers can hear for themselves to "make up their minds."

Despite the erasure of the journalistic role in recontextualizing the tape, the lead-in to the playback of the tape is nevertheless littered with contextualization cues on how to decode the utterance. In excerpt 3, before promising to let viewers listen for themselves, Cooper first says, "Now before we tell you what the alleged slur is. . ." The phrase "the alleged slur" presupposes the potential for a slur, as of course does

the entire premise of the show's playback of the 911 tape. This presupposition is also found in warnings of viewer discretion in the lead-ins to the playback of the tape, as seen in the two excerpts that follow.

4. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, MARCH 21, 2012)

COOPER: We need to warn some of you the language you're going to hear *is* offensive, but we're going to play it for you without bleeping anything because it's evidence, and if we bleep it you're going to have a harder time hearing what some believe is a racial slur. Here's Gary Tuchman.

5. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, APRIL 4, 2012)

BLITZER: Now the 911 tape of George Zimmerman's call. As he was pursuing Trayvon Martin through the gated community he was patrolling. We should warn you right now you're going to hear some stro:ng la:nguage. You might want to send your kids out of the room. The two words you'll hear are an expletive, and some believe a racial slur.

In excerpt 4, Cooper emphasizes the word *is* to add epistemic certainty to his remark that the "language you're going to hear is offensive." Likewise, in excerpt 5, Wolf Blitzer (filling in that night for Cooper) lengthens the vowels in *strong* and *language* as he states, "right now you're going to hear some strong language." In addition, following Blitzer's lead-in on the April 4 show, a silent black screen appears for ten seconds with text in white letters that reads: "The following story contains material that may be offensive to some viewers. Viewer discretion is advised." All of these calls for viewer discretion belie the fact that what viewers are about to hear is anything but clear or certain.

Yet despite the lack of clarity of the tape, viewers are provided with likely readings through the "precontextualized" (Oddo 2013) descriptions provided by the journalists. In excerpt 4, Cooper describes the words as "what some believe is a racial slur," and in excerpt 5, Blitzer states, "The two words you'll hear are an expletive, and some believe a racial slur." Viewers are thus primed to cognitively assimilate the sounds they hear as slurs. Moreover, even if they do not ultimately hear a slur with their own "fresh ears," as Cooper puts it (excerpt 3), they nevertheless are fully invested in the exercise of "hunting for 'racists'" by deciding on which side Zimmerman falls in the slur vs. nonslur, racist vs. nonracist binary.

Professional Hearing and the Production of Intertextual Authority

As the journalists frame the playback of the tape in terms of the racist/nonracist binary, they position viewers not just as passive hearers but as active listeners, which "implies an effortful activity on the part of the listener, who interprets the sounds they hear" (Ashmore et al. 2004:351, citing Ashmore and Reed 2000). Moreover, insofar as the activity involves the perceptual act of hearing, it relies upon a type of "professional hearing," similar to the professional hearing Bucholtz (2009) discusses in her analysis of law enforcement entextualization practices, or the related forms of "professional vision" that Goodwin (1994) discusses in his analysis of the Rodney King video. But here, the professional hearing is derived from the expertise of the audio engineers consulted by the journalists. The professional practices used to enhance the sounds on the tape—and to metapragmatically frame those sounds as certain types of words—guide viewers to actively listen and "assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (Bakhtin 1986:89) the words on the tape in line with the dominant ideology's focus on racism in binary, individualist terms.

Central to these professional hearing practices is the production of intertextual authority—that is, the authority that endows the journalists and audio engineers with the power to speak for the tape and to shape the way the tape is recontextualized

within the wider discourse surrounding Martin's death. This intertextual authority is constructed through a dual focus on the agents involved in preparing the tape for its playback and the equipment used to enhance its clarity. This can be seen in the excerpts that follow.

6. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, MARCH 21, 2012)

TUCHMAN: This is Edit Room 31 at CNN Center in Atlanta, this is one of the most sophisticated audio edit suites in the broadcast news business, and right here is Rick Sierra, he's our audio design specialist. He's one of the best audio experts in the business.

7. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, APRIL 4, 2012)

TUCHMAN: This is Brian Stone, he's one of our senior audio engineers, [Correct.] an expert in this field. And you have enhanced the tape and we're going to listen to this.

Excerpts 6 and 7 both feature CNN journalist Gary Tuchman as he introduces viewers to the sound rooms in which he, along with an audio engineer, will replay the 911 tape. In excerpt 6, the emphasis on the special setting for the March 21 show is indicated by naming the space with a proper noun ("Edit Room 31") and marking it with a superlative ("most sophisticated"). Elsewhere in the transcripts during the April 4 show, he refers to the space as a "state-of-the-art room" (see excerpt 13). Accompanying the introduction to the specialness of the "audio edit suite" in excerpt 6 is the establishment of Rick Sierra's credentials as CNN's "audio design specialist." Tuchman elaborates that "he's one of the best audio experts in the business." Likewise, in Excerpt 7, Tuchman introduces Brian Stone as one of CNN's "senior audio engineers" and "an expert in this field." Such pronouncements are echoed in the lead-ins to these sound room sessions by Cooper on March 21 and Blitzer on April 4, as seen in the excerpts that follow.

8. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, MARCH 21, 2012)

COOPER: For that we enlisted the help of one of CNN's top audio engineers.

9. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, APRIL 4, 2012)

BLITZER: When the question first came up, 360's Gary Tuchman worked with one of our top audio experts to enhance the tape.

The parallel noun phrases used by Cooper ("top audio engineers") and Blitzer ("top audio experts"), on the one hand, and Tuchman, ("best audio experts"), on the other, to introduce the engineers create "dialogic resonance" (Du Bois 2007, 2014) between the journalists' utterances.² This dialogic resonance aids the journalists as they co-construct intertextual authority: the parallel structure across these noun phrases creates an analogy between "engineer" and "expert" (the head of the noun phrases) so that the audio engineers are positioned as authorities. Moreover, these introductions emphasize the cultural capital of the audio engineers, which separates them from lay audience members or other tech amateurs who lack the skills and expertise of these engineers. Much of that expertise is connected to their access to high-tech equipment and their ability to use that equipment to strip away unwanted noise on the tape and thereby uncover the "true identity" of the words it (allegedly) contains.

The following excerpt provides an extended interaction between Tuchman and Sierra on the March 21 show. The interaction between the two in this excerpt is bounded by playbacks of the tape. As noted earlier, the sound room session on the March 21 show revisited the tape four times. Recall that the first two of those playbacks are featured in excerpt 1; the other two playbacks are featured in excerpt 10.

10. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, MARCH 21, 2012)

- TAPE: (···) (···) (···) ((segment in question plays 3 times with a slight pause between, lasting about 7 seconds))
- TUCHMAN: It- it's certainly a- a lot clearer when we listen to it this way.
- SIERRA: Correct.
- TUCHMAN: Is there anything else we can do with that audio to make it even clearer?
- SIERRA: Well you can I- I've (.) already did a little bit of boosting at two point two kilohertz and at four point six kilohertz. Uh that's boosting the high end [of the voice.]
- TUCHMAN: [This sounds like] it could the power- power the flux capacitor [in *Back to the Future*. Okay. Okay.]
- SIERRA: [That's right. ((smiling)) That's right.]
- TUCHMAN: ((in pre-recorded voice-over)) What Rick has done is lowered the bass.
- TUCHMAN: ((back in sound room)) So why is it that you want to get rid of the low end of the audio the bass of the audio?
- SIERRA: Well to minimize the noise.
- TUCHMAN: To minimize the noise. So that takes away the noise, and allows us to hear the voice more clearly.
- SIERRA: That's correct. I'll boost it up a little bit more there. (.) And we'll (.) give it a shot here.
- TAPE: (···) (···) (···) (···) (···) ((segment in question plays 5 times in quick succession, lasting about 8 seconds))

The fetishization of the tape is clearly on display here as the tape itself becomes the centerpiece of the interaction between Tuchman and Sierra. The different playback permutations are also well-illustrated in excerpt 10. At the beginning of the excerpt, the two-word segment is repeated three times with a slight pause in between each repetition. In the final playback of the tape (at the end of excerpt 10), the single word corresponding to the alleged slur is repeated five times in quick succession. With the tape enhanced to pull out these isolated segments, the professional hearing techniques supplied by the audio engineer and his equipment allow viewers to gain what is represented as a privileged position for hearing the sounds on the tape and thereby being able to interpret them as not just words (as opposed to noise) but as certain types of words.

The interaction between Tuchman and Sierra in excerpt 10 represents "tech talk," which works to establish intertextual authority by emphasizing insider expertise in the operation of the audio equipment. After Tuchman asks Sierra if there's "anything else we can do with that audio to make it even clearer," Sierra responds that he "already did a little bit of boosting at 2.2 kilohertz and at 4.6 kilohertz." At that point, Sierra perhaps realizes that his description is a bit too technical, and he immediately shifts into a translation for a lay audience: "Uh that's boosting the high end of the voice." As Sierra finishes his explanation, Tuchman overlaps him with his own remark, which begins to poke fun at the technical description Sierra first supplies through an allusion to a made-up technical phrase ("boosting the flux capacitor") from the movie, *Back to the Future*. The joking works to call attention to Sierra's expertise by highlighting the gap between that expertise and Tuchman's/ viewers' expertise. The jocular remarks are immediately followed by a voice-over in which Tuchman seriously explains the meaning of the technical jargon used by Sierra in terms that a lay audience may understand: "What Rick has done is lowered the bass." The translation simplifies the technical details and underscores the intertextual authority possessed by Tuchman and Sierra to make the tape "hearable."

After the voice-over, Tuchman and Sierra work together to further summarize the significance of what has been done to enhance the tape's sound. The whole point, we are told, is to "minimize the noise." As Tuchman summarizes, that "allows us to hear

the voice more clearly." Ultimately, the whole point of the technology is to extract a voice out of the noise, to isolate words (and hence meaning) out of a background of sounds deemed to be meaningless. This effort is further discussed by Tuchman with audio engineer Brian Stone in the second sound room session featured on the April 4 show, as seen in the excerpt that follows.

11. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, APRIL 4, 2012)

TAPE: (··) (··) (··) (··) ((segment in question plays 4 times, lasting about 9 seconds))
 TUCHMAN: So the key is though the wind. To get rid of the wind.
 STONE: Correct. Wind and anything (0.8) broadband noise.
 TUCHMAN: That's what we [(··)] have done this time as compared to last time.
 STONE: Correct.
 TUCHMAN: And so you have basically used this plugin to just get rid of the noise you don't want.
 STONE: It reduces and cleans up a lot of that broadband noise. Yes.
 TUCHMAN: But does it change the voice at all? Could it change a word?
 STONE: It will not change a word. No.
 TUCHMAN: Just makes it clearer?
 STONE: Correct.
 TUCHMAN: Brian can you play that for us one more time?
 STONE: Sure.
 TAPE: (··) (··) ((segment in question plays twice, lasting about 5 seconds before fading into Tuchman's voice-over))

All this effort put into isolating the word on the tape is framed by the "hunting for 'racists'" language game in which background noises on the tape ("wind" or "broadband noise") become distractions from hearing the "truth" of the words and through them, Zimmerman's intent.

In introducing this second sound room session on the April 4 show, AC360 host Wolf Blitzer notes that they "have been able to use an even higher-tech method to isolate what was said that night." Tuchman refers to those methods in his interaction with Stone in excerpt 11. Again acting as the intermediary between the audio expert and the television audience, Tuchman summarizes those methods, "And so you have basically used this plug-in to just get rid of the noise you don't want." Stone affirms: "It reduces and cleans up a lot of that broadband noise. Yes."

However, Tuchman anticipates a potential problem as more layers of the nonverbal context are stripped away so viewers can hear just the word. Tuchman inquires, "But does it change the voice at all? Could it change a word?" After all, it is the entextualized word—as seen through the ideologies of referentialism and personalism—that acts as a package that must be unwrapped to gain insight into the mind of the speaker on that night. Even the preceding expletive can be bleeped or elided in the playbacks of the tape (which it is), but the slur must be uncovered per the rules of the language game. Stone replies, "It will not change a word. No." Over two more turns, Tuchman and Stone further confirm that assertion, thereby working to validate the professional hearing practices used by the engineer and his equipment.

The emphasis on the expertise of the audio engineers and the equipment they command works to construct the requisite intertextual authority to allow the journalists to speak for the tape. Note, however, that despite the effortful nature of the professional hearing practices employed by the journalists and audio engineers, not to mention the reliance on highly specialized equipment, the intertextual authority that such practices construct positions the journalists in line with what Matoesian (2013:649) terms a "neutral relayer footing." As such, the journalists are positioned as agents who merely replay the tape "to harvest historical information" rather than as active shapers of the tape's contents or its meaning within the broader discourse about the incident. In this way, the journalists' role in setting up the

"hunting for 'racists'" language game is erased, just as the assumptions about racism that undergird the enactment of the game are hidden from view.

Stance-Taking in Relation to the Tape

It is important to underscore that the uncertain identity of the words on the tape is orthogonal to the actual exercise in listening for those words. That is, it is the exercise in *attempting to hear* either a slur or a nonslur that matters most, not whether or not a slur is definitively uncovered. This is because the mere supposition that a slur might exist resonates with and reproduces the dominant ideology's narrow definition of racism as individual bigotry. In many ways, the uncertainty surrounding the alleged slur's existence intensifies the "hunting for 'racists'" language game by engaging everyone in the activity and forcing them to choose sides in the simplified racist vs. nonracist binary. The more people who become invested in this exercise, the more people there are to enact and reproduce dominant ideological understandings of racism.

The evaluation of the tape as potentially containing a slur even amid epistemic uncertainty therefore takes on central importance in this exercise. In the following excerpt, Tuchman and Sierra co-construct an evaluative stance with regard to this potential.

12. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, MARCH 21, 2012)

TUCHMAN: I mean it certainly sounds like that word to me, although you just can't be sure=

SIERRA: =Can't be sure.=

TUCHMAN: =But that sounds even more like the word than using it when it was in with the
(.) F word before that.

SIERRA: That's- (stops tape) That's correct.

In this exchange between Tuchman and Sierra, Tuchman takes the stance lead in evaluating the word on the tape—that is, the stance object (Du Bois 2007, 2014). His evaluation tentatively characterizes the word as a slur. As he says in the first turn, "it certainly sounds like that word to me" (where "that word" refers to the "slur"). His emphasis on the word *me* indexes his role as a stance-taking subject. In Tuchman's second turn, he further reiterates his evaluation of the word as a slur, saying "that sounds even more like the word" than on previous playbacks of the tape. However, Tuchman's evaluation is accompanied by epistemic uncertainty, as indicated in his utterance, "You just can't be sure." Notably, he uses the pronoun *you* in this utterance, rather than *I*. This is a generalized *you* that attributes uncertainty not just to himself or to Sierra, but to viewers in his audience and to people in general. Sierra aligns with Tuchman's epistemic stance by repeating the phrase "can't be sure," which achieves "resonance across successive stance utterances" (Du Bois 2007:172). In the second pair of turns, there is further stance alignment. As Tuchman reminds viewers of his tentative evaluation, Sierra affirms that evaluation as he concurs, "That's correct." Through this dialogic resonance and stance alignment, the two professional interlocutors align with one another, and in turn position their audience to take up a similar stance in alignment with them. Yet even if the audience chooses to take up a different alignment to the stance object (the word on the tape), they still must do so within the language game of "hunting for 'racists.'" That is, to contradict the preferred reading provided by the journalists merely involves taking an opposite stance within the evaluative binary already in place.

Whereas Tuchman and Sierra discursively co-construct the likely existence of a slur during the March 21 show, Tuchman and Stone take the opposite stance during the new sound room session on the April 4 show, as seen in the excerpt that follows.

13. ANDERSON COOPER 360° (CNN, APRIL 4, 2012)

- TAPE: (···) (···) (···) (···) ((segment in question plays 4 times, lasting about 9 seconds))
- TUCHMAN: You can stop for it now- Now it does sound less (0.8) like that racial slur last time I acknowledged the possibility it could have been that slur. From listening in this room, and this is (.) a state-of-the art room, it doesn't sound like that slur anymore.
- STONE: Right.
- TUCHMAN: It sounds like, and we wanted to leave it up to the viewer, but it sounds like we're hearing (.) the swear word at first and then the word cold. And the reason some say that would be relevant is because it was unseasonably co:ld in Florida that night and raining. So that's what some supporters of Zimmerman are saying, that that would make sense if he was saying the word cold. (.) But that's what it sounds like to you?
- STONE: It does to me. And I- and I have not heard this.
- TUCHMAN: First time you've heard it?=
STONE: =Yeah.
(1.8)
- TUCHMAN: Can we play it a few more times?
- STONE: Sure.
- TAPE: (···) (···) (···) (···) ((segment in question plays 4 times, lasting about 9 seconds))

As he did in the prior sound room session with Sierra, Tuchman again takes the stance lead in evaluating the word in excerpt 13. He claims that "it does sound less like that racial slur." Epistemic uncertainty nevertheless remains, as he lengthens the vowel on the word *less* to indicate that his change of mind seems to be simply a matter of degree rather than a categorical shift. But the *less* changes to *not* in the structurally parallel statement that follows at the end of his turn: "it doesn't sound like that slur anymore." Stone concurs, "Right." In the pair of turns that follow, Tuchman provides a new preferred reading of the word despite his claim "to leave it up to the viewer." Tuchman asserts that "it sounds like we're hearing...the word cold." He supports this new evaluation by providing a supporting reason why it would make sense to hear the word *cold* in place of what was previously thought to be a slur: "And the reason...is because it was unseasonably cold in Florida that night and raining." Although much effort was expended to strip away nonverbal aspects of that prior context, here one aspect of the prior context is intentionally added back. This underscores the necessarily selective nature of recontextualizing prior words despite the impression provided by the journalists that they are neutral conveyors of the tape. Tuchman cites defenders of Zimmerman to further support this new preferred reading, and then enlists Stone to take up an alignment with his evaluative stance. Tuchman asks Stone, "But that's what it sounds like to you?" to which Stone replies, "It does to me."

Again, the precise conclusions about the word on the tape drawn by Tuchman and the audio engineers is less important than the fact that they engage in this stance-taking, which works to set up an evaluative framework that revolves around the slur vs. nonslur binary. That Tuchman and the audio engineers adopt different stances in the different sound room sessions merely facilitates interest in and prolongs the language game. Regardless of the preferred reading the journalists provide, and regardless of the alignment the audience ultimately takes in relation to that preferred reading, the language game of accusing or absolving Zimmerman of being a "racist" in line with the dominant ideology's conception of racism is set in motion. The stance-taking here "becomes a form of distributed action" (Du Bois and Kärkkäinen 2012:441) that reverberates beyond the immediate interactional context as audience members are implicitly encouraged to take part in the stance-taking of the language game, as well. In other words, it is through this distributed action that the "hunting for 'racists'" language game is played, thereby reaffirming the narrow conceptualization of racism bound up in the dominant ideology.

Conclusion

As illustrated in this analysis, the tape fetishism surrounding journalists' recontextualizations of George Zimmerman's 911 call on the night he killed Trayvon Martin positions the audio recording as a supposedly objective and self-evident record of the past while erasing the interpretive dimensions involved in those recontextualizations. This tape fetishism leads to, as Voloshinov (1973:119) describes it, "the fundamental error of virtually divorcing the reported speech from the reporting context." Moreover, what takes place in the reporting context is a type of language game that enacts and reproduces the dominant racial ideology's concern with locating racism solely in the minds of hate-filled individuals. At the same time, this language game obscures the systemic and institutional dimensions of racism, which include the way racism leads to widely shared cultural stereotypes that position young black men as criminals and the way police departments give the benefit of doubt to nonwhite killers of unarmed black men. In other words, this language game directs social actors to engage in a binary debate over racism in simplified terms that fails to account for the myriad ways race and racism factored into the incident. Crucially, the enactment and reproduction of the dominant racial ideology through this language game does not depend upon whether listeners actually hear a slur on the tape. To merely engage in this type of language game is sufficient in and of itself to forward the dominant racial ideology's assumptions about racism. The analysis has therefore attempted to underscore the way the dominant ideology's assumptions are collectively enacted and reproduced. Moreover, in keeping with an agenda exemplified by Hill (2008), the analysis has attempted to expose the often-hidden assumptions about racism in mainstream discourse in an effort to challenge the idea that racism amounts to nothing more than individual bigotry, and to supplant that unmarked understanding with a critically informed perspective that recognizes the complex and hidden dimensions of racism that continue to impede racial justice.

Notes

- The following transcription conventions are used.

.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
/	Continuing intonation
-	Marks an abrupt cutoff
:	Length
<u>word</u>	Indicates stress/emphasis placed on word
[]	Simultaneous or overlapping speech
=	Latching, or contiguous utterances
(1.0)	Timed pause of longer than a half second
(.)	Short pause of less than a half second
(...)	Unintelligible speech
((words))	Transcriber's comments or description of nonspeech activity

2. Note that this applies even though the utterances occur across space and time. "What is essential to dialogicality is not dialogue in the narrow sense, but engagement with prior words and structures" (Du Bois 2014:372).

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