Being talked into (and out of) whiteness

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Are you white?
Do you know someone who’s white?

Let’s talk.

(Warning: This presentation analyzes racist language, images, and ideas.)
Race as a system of power

• Through racialization, bodies are located within a system of inequality

• The centerpiece of this system is whiteness
The invention of modern whiteness

- Blumenbach’s “scientific” system of racial classification
- Caucasian as a racial category
  - “the most beautiful race of men, I mean the Georgian”
Whiteness

• People of color have had to become experts in whiteness in order to survive and resist — e.g., James Baldwin, Ta-Nahisi Coates, W.E.B. Du Bois, Franz Fanon, bell hooks, Toni Morrison...

• “It is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false; it is that whiteness is nothing but oppressive and false” (Roediger 1994: 13)
But you don’t mean me, right?

- Yes, I do! (if you’re white)
- White people: Those who benefit from whiteness
- Critiquing whiteness isn’t enough
- White people also need to be critiqued and held accountable
  - Because we as white people uphold white supremacy every minute of every day
Varieties of white racism

• militant racism
  – virulent, violent, visible, audible, proud

• mainstream racism
  – in denial about its own existence
  – often well-intentioned
  – often difficult (for white people) to see/hear

• mutually dependent
The protective shroud of whiteness

- white supremacy
  - structural and ideological domination by white people as a class (Leonardo 2004)
  - benefits for individual white people
    - whiteness as the unmarked norm
      - at least to white people
    - white privilege (Mcintosh 1989)
    - the denial of whiteness as structural advantage
Colorblind racism

• The denial of the relevance and significance of race and racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003)
• From the civil rights era until recently, the predominant form of mainstream racism
• White racism is becoming more visible and audible (again)
  – However, in its current form it incorporates rather than contradicts colorblind racism
The feeling of whiteness

• The possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz 1998) is both material and symbolic (cf. Harris 1993)

• white affects: emotions that reinforce white supremacy
  – white rage (Anderson 2016)
  – white fear (Ioanide 2015)
  – white guilt (Sullivan 2014)
  – white fragility (DiAngelo 2011)
How can linguistic anthropology help challenge whiteness?

- Discourse analysis: How white people articulate whiteness
- Semiotic analysis: How white people enact whiteness
- Tracking changes in these across time/space
  - Whiteness has traditionally been not only invisible but also inaudible (Trechter & Bucholtz 2001)
    - White racism has recently become hypervisible and hyperaudible
    - Yet critical discussions of whiteness remain rare in public discourse
Discourses of whiteness across age, time, and space

• White youth in California in the 1990s
• White youth in California from 2010 to today
• White adults in the public sphere today
Three white discourse strategies

1. Colormute racism
2. The disavowal of racism
3. The discursive appropriation of the positionality of minoritized groups

- All of these are driven by white affects
1. Colormute racism

- reluctance to name race (Pollock 2005)
- the rejection of race and racism as a basis of social inequality
  – “anything but race” (Bonilla-Silva 2000)
Josie: But I just think that that’s—I don’t think it’s a race thing. I just think it’s an economics, like, social thing more.

Zoe: Unconscious kind of thing too.

Josie: Unconscious.

Mary: Yeah.

Josie: And, I think, um, (pause) It just so happens in Bay City that the majority of people whose parents are pushing them, the majority of people whose parents like, (lower volume) who’ve gone to college, are white.

And it’s just.

Zoe: Yeah.

Josie: I don’t know, I mean I— I just think that’s tr— I—

Zoe: Yeah.

Josie: I think it’s true.
“Nothing to do with race” (2017)

The issue of kneeling has nothing to do with race. It is about respect for our Country, Flag and National Anthem. NFL must respect this!

4:39 AM - 25 Sep 2017

56,064 Retweets  207,093 Likes
2. The disavowal of racism

• Individual disavowals of racist intent perpetuate the illusion of white innocence
  – Mainstream liberal racism has long denied its own existence
• But even open and militant racists reject the label of racism
“I’m not a racist”

- the personalist ideology of white racism (Hill 2008)
  - intentionalist fallacy
  - racism as individual rather than structural
- “hunting for racists” as a “game” that reproduces white supremacy (Hodges 2016)
- The humorous practice of “crying racist” among Korean American youth challenges colorblind and personalist ideologies of racism (Reyes 2011)
“I know it sounds really racist, but” (1996)

Josie: People, like, whose parents go to college, who, who live in like— And I’m not saying, I’m not— I don’t mean— And I, know it sounds really like, racist when I say that, but- that- and, um, that like- people- other people don’t- par- whose parents don’t go to college?
“I am the least racist person” (2015)
“The sheriff is not a racist and has never been a racist” (2017)
“I’m not the angry racist they see in that photo” (2017)
“We are not neo-Nazis” (2016)

Hail Trump! Hail our people! Hail victory!
3. Appropriation of the discourse of minoritized groups

- using **the lexicon of marginalization**
  - “heritage,” “culture,” “minority,” etc.
- claiming to be the targets of **(reverse) “racism”**
“Diversity” in higher education

- Dominant higher education discourses erase race (and racism) by replacing race with “culture” and “diversity” (Urciuoli 2009, 2010)
“Diverse” (1996)

Claire: Everyone has really different groups of friends. (pause) Actually I shouldn’t say that. Most of my friends have, (pause) really, (pause) diverse group of friends.

Mary: Mhm.
Claire: And I don’t mean diverse as in, (pause) ethnically, but just diverse as in, everything.

Mary: Hm. (pause)
Claire: You know?

Mary: Like interests and-
Claire: Yeah. You know. Completely diverse. (pause) But-

Mary: Is it also ethnically diverse or is it,
Claire: Um,
Mary: (How would you describe it?) (pause)
Claire: Somewhat.
“Diverse” (1996)

Claire: I mean, I’d like to say it was more but, (pause) the fact of the matter is that it’s true, I’m in high tracked classes, it’s very, (pause) it’s very white looking. And I don’t meet other people. You know, I- I- I definitely have friends, (pause) who are of different races and different ethnic backgrounds than me, but it’s just hard because I don’t meet a lot of people. And the people, I mean the people in my classes, that I— I mean I always talk to, but sometimes, we click and sometimes we don’t. And it’s completely interest related, I think, about your friends.

Mary: Uh huh.

Claire: Because people who have different interests just can’t be friends. I’ve tried it, doesn’t work.
“Diverse” (2010)
“Diverse” (2010)

William: When you’re sort of separating people by language groups, you’re not really getting the diverse feel that I feel like this country sort of was almost born upon.”
“Diversity” (2017)

• "I support diversity and inclusion, and I think that also our lack of ideological diversity has hurt our products.”
“Diversity” (2017)
“Diversity” (2017)

• Matt Garcia, Mexican American Arlington native
  – “I always thought of Arlington as a diverse and welcoming place. Seeing a Nazi flag go up in your neighborhood is shocking and disturbing, especially after what happened in Charlottesville.

• white New Order leader
  – “There are lots of things in society that offend and disgust me. That’s part of living in a diverse society. You have to put up with it.”
  – “It shows whether or not they can tolerate us. It shows their commitment to diversity.”
Jamaal Muwwakkil

- MA/PhD student, Linguistics, UC Santa Barbara
- MA thesis on the discourse of white conservative undergraduates on a liberal university campus
Sean Hannity got his start at UCSB’s campus radio station
“Isolating” (2017)

Alexander: Um, so how does it feel to be conservative. Um, it’s very, isolating. Um. And I wouldn't just say for me. I would say for a lot of the people around me. Um. I spent my whole first year here basically staying alone in my dorm. Uh, not because— Not just because I had like views that were different than other people. But because I didn't have ways to express it to those other people without worrying that they were gonna say, “No you’re not right nah,” like, “You’re a bigot. Leave.”
“Uncomfortable” (2017)
“Uncomfortable” (2017)

“Why does it matter?” Ghouri asked. “Why do you have to feel superior? Are we forcing them to speak another language or do another thing? No. You do whatever you want to do. We are living in a growing and thriving community, and we are going to do what we want to do.”

“It can make some people uncomfortable is all I’m saying,” Gambino said.

“The best way to handle that is to get to know each other,” Ghouri said. “I can understand it’s uncomfortable, but you have to be courageous. Otherwise, this cycle of hate is going to continue and the fear we have of each other will never go away.”

Things That Make White People Uncomfortable by Michael Bennett
White fragility: The Nazi’s tears
(Reverse) racism

- the ideological belief that white people face discrimination and oppression from people of color and their supposed institutional benefactors
- “Reverse racism” is impossible within the current racial system of white supremacy
"Racism" (1996)

Claire: It’s so like, “We all got to show each other respect.” It’s like, “Yeah well, you should be doing that anyway. We don’t need to make a big deal out of it. We shouldn’t make people go and”

Christine: A big political campaign about giving people respect,

Claire: I know.

Christine: it’s like,

Claire: It’s like, (whisper) Multiculturalism, oh my god.

Christine: "Why don’t you just do it."

Christine: Teach people how to hate white kids.

Mary: Oh yeah?

Claire: I’m really bitter about that class. (laughs)
Anna Bax

• Doctoral candidate in Linguistics at UCSB
• Award-winning student paper on “reverse racism” in the George Zimmerman trial (under review)
• “the C-word” (cracker/cracka)
“Racism” (2013)

JEANTEL: I asked him how the man look like. He look like a creepy-ass cracker.
Laura Ingraham:

She went on to say that she didn’t think that this was racist. For many non-blacks, this was shocking to hear.

(51 seconds omitted from transcript)

Left-wing elites fall all over themselves to avoid criticizing behavior among black youth, that they would never tolerate from most upper-crust white kids. Like the use of the N-word, or the F-word, or the C-word. (i.e., cracker)
“Racism” (2017)

- “Blue Racism,” NYPD Sergeants Benevolent Association video
- “an even more racist lens”
Not “by the color of their skin”

“I have a dream, that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by their color, but by the content of their character.”

Martin Luther King
Talking oneself and others into whiteness

• Apparently very different kinds of white people in different times and places use similar discursive strategies to uphold white supremacy

• These discourses do not rely on rational argumentation but on affects that are protective of whiteness

• Giving up whiteness means giving up its material and symbolic benefits
Talking oneself and others out of whiteness

• **Name** our own and others’ whiteness
• **Acknowledge** our unearned white privilege
• Continually **scrutinize** how our whiteness shapes our affects and limits and distorts our perceptions
• **Learn** about the harm done by whiteness primarily by reading and listening, not by asking people of color to teach us
• **Be open to critique** (especially from people of color)
• **Work** to dismantle the hegemonic power of whiteness
Thank you!

Want to keep talking?

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