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# The Everyday Language of White Racism

Jane H. Hill

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## Chapter 1

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# The Persistence of White Racism

### **Introduction: Racism, Race, and Racial Disparities**

I began to write this chapter in the early months of 2004, 140 years after the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1864, 80 years out from the establishment of citizenship for Native Americans in 1924, and during the 50th anniversary of the US Supreme Court's great decision of 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended official segregation in US public schools. The US Civil Rights Act of 1964, which proscribed racial discrimination in broad areas of American life, was 40 years old.

The people who made these landmarks live in daguerreotypes, in flickering black and white film, in reunions of graying veterans of the Civil Rights movement. Today most Whites see White racism as a part of the American past, and anti-racist struggle as largely completed. Yet people of color – African Americans, Native Americans, Americans of Latin American or Asian or Middle Eastern ancestry – consistently report that they experience racism (Alter 2004; Bobo 2001; Feagin and Sykes 1994). These reports are not the product of oversensitivity or paranoia. Instead, they may even understate the impact that White racism has on the everyday lives of people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin and Vera 1995).

While American workplaces and public institutions are increasingly integrated, very few Whites have social friends among people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2003:107–111). White isolation makes it easy for them to dismiss the complaints of people of color as “whining” and “playing the race card.” Whites do not themselves experience harassment for “driving while Black,” or the stony inattention encountered when “ordering a restaurant meal while Indian.” Their conversations with family and friends are never interrupted by perfect strangers telling them to “Speak English! This is America!” Nobody has ever tried to seduce them by confessing that they’ve “always wanted to make it with a hot Asian chick.” And they don’t have the kinds

of conversations with people of color where they would hear about such incidents, which are so frequent as to be stereotypical. Everyday moments of discrimination are only part of the picture, though. Statistics for a wide range of indicators stratified by three major racial groups in the United States, shown in Table 1, reveal a consistent picture of gross disparities.<sup>1</sup>

The numbers in Table 1 capture quantitatively what is obvious to anyone who drives through an American city, attends a college graduation, visits a corporate headquarters, sits in a hospital emergency room, or accomplishes any other kind of everyday engagement with the world. What might explain these vivid inequalities? Brown et al. (2003) argue that they result from two opposing dynamics, "accumulation" that favors Whites, and "disaccumulation" that continues to disadvantage people of color. Yet we know that ordinary White people do not feel that they enjoy any benefit due to their race. Nor do they believe that people of color continue to face disadvantage. So, how do White people explain these numbers, and the visible evidence that they quantify, given that they think that racism has ended in the United States?

**Table 1** Disparities in economic, health, and social indicators by "race" in the United States<sup>2</sup>

<i>Indicator type</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>White</i>
Economic	Per capita income (2004)	14,106	16,035	25,203
	Median family income (2004)	35,401	35,158	56,700
	Household net worth (2000) <sup>3</sup>	9,750	7,500	79,400
	Home ownership <sup>4</sup>	49.5%	48.2%	72.7%
	Unemployment (2005, with high school degree, no college)	4.5%	8.5%	4.0%
	Poverty rate	21.9%	24.7%	10.8%
Health	Private health insurance (under 65) <sup>5</sup>	41.7%	53.9	71.4
	Life expectancy <sup>6</sup>	79.5 (2001) <sup>7</sup>	73.3	78.3
	Infant mortality	4.00/1,000	13.65/1,000	5.65/1,000
Social	Married	57.0%	41.0%	61.0%
	Female-headed family with children under 18	25.0%	52.0%	18.0%
	Women never married	25.6%	39.5%	18.7%
	High school degree	58.5%	81.1%	85.7
	B.A. degree	12.0%	17.6%	28.0%
	Incarceration per 100,000 <sup>8</sup>	742	2,290	412

Most White Americans do admit that isolated pockets of White racism persist – perhaps in northern Idaho, or southern Georgia. However, the disparities charted in Table 1, which are consistent across every region of the United States, are unlikely to result from the actions of those very few members of the White community – openly declared White supremacists – that all Whites categorize as “racists.” A few thousand Ku Kluxers can hardly claim responsibility for the fact that the average household net worth of African Americans is less than one-tenth that of White households.<sup>9</sup>

Since common sense requires White Americans to reject the idea that these racial disparities are due to racism as they understand it – that is, as overt expression of White supremacy – they often conclude that they result from some fault of those who suffer. So they are credulous when the long-discredited idea that there might be a biologically based difference in intelligence among the races was revived in the last years of the twentieth century, in the bestseller *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). However, while differential intelligence might explain the disparities in educational accomplishment seen in Table 1, it hardly accounts for the twofold disparity in figures for unemployment. Surely the labor market offers enough grunt jobs that this difference should be no more than 11 percent or so, as predicted by *The Bell Curve*'s figures for differential intelligence.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the table shows a 100 percent disparity, with African American unemployment twice that of Whites. Nor can the alleged average difference in IQ explain an African American infant mortality rate two and a half times that of Whites. The Hispanic figures contradict such an association: Hispanics have rates of school completion similar to those of African Americans, and yet exhibit lower rates of infant mortality even than Whites.<sup>11</sup>

A White American trying to account for these statistics might turn to ideas about cultural differences among ethnic groups, believing, for instance, that Hispanics typically enjoy large, close-knit extended families that provide good support for expectant mothers, explaining their low figures for infant mortality. Or they might believe that African Americans do not value higher education, but seek success in fields like sports and popular music, thus explaining their low rate of completion of bachelor's degrees. But, as we shall see below, these ideas about “culture” do not survive critical attention from an anthropological point of view.

Of course we cannot ignore the weight of history. African Americans were never compensated for their exclusion as slaves from the wealth of the nation built with their labor, for being terrorized by Whites out of such small property as they might accumulate in the dark years of Jim Crow, for their formal exclusion from resources distributed by twentieth-century government programs such as the GI Bill, FHA mortgage assistance, aid to small businesses, and support for farmers, through the mid-1960s

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and even later (Lipsitz 1998). Disparities in household net worth, or life expectancy, might be a residue of this history. But "history" does not explain differences in short-range phenomena such as median per capita income, unemployment, college graduation, or incarceration. If discrimination has been largely vanquished for the last 40 years, two generations, the racial stratification of these factors should surely have disappeared.

Along with many other scholars who have investigated the question, I suggest that what does account for these numbers is the persistent culture of White racism in the United States. White racism is not just part of American history. Instead, White racist culture today organizes racist practices in White-dominated institutions such as schools and health-care facilities, and everyday choices and behaviors by the vast majority of Whites operating as individuals. White racist culture is shaped by a "White racial frame," "an organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate" (Feagin 2006:27), along with interpretations that rationalize the discrimination against people of color that is indeed old (dating back to the earliest stages of the oppression of people of African descent by Whites in the New World), but continues as a vivid fact of life in the contemporary United States. The impacts shown in Table 1 are of such generality, and such a magnitude, as to suggest strongly that racism must be practiced in some way by a very substantial number of Whites, at every level of class and status. To render their practices invisible, and to tolerate or to discount their effects, Whites must share negative stereotypes of people of color, permitting them to blame these victims. How are such stereotypes produced and reproduced among people who deny that they are racist and who claim to abhor racism in word and deed (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin and Vera 1995)? How does White racism actually work today?<sup>12</sup> This book aims at a partial answer to these questions by examining how White Americans produce and reproduce the culture of White racism through their use of language, from high literary text, to language in every sort of mass media, to everyday talk and text produced by ordinary people.

Before turning to my main topic, the reproduction of White racism in language, I want to introduce the theories that anthropologists and other scholars today find most productive in thinking about race, and about White racism. These critical theories challenge what I call the "folk theory" of racism. The folk theory is an interpretation, a way of thinking about racism, that is crucial to the perpetuation of White racist culture. Since for most White people the folk theory is undeniable common sense, ideas that contradict it require careful discussion. The folk theory interacts with the linguistic ideologies discussed in Chapter 2 in intricate ways that make possible the simultaneous reproduction and denial of White racism. Since one of the goals of this book is to show how this works, we need to know what the folk theory of racism is, and why it is inadequate to explain racial

disparities in American society today. And we need to understand the critical theory of White racism as culture, which underlies the ideas presented in this book.

### Two Theories of Race and Racism: Folk Theory and Critical Theory

Cognitive anthropologists (e.g. D'Andrade 1995) use the term "folk theory" or "folk model" to label the everyday understandings of the world, found in all societies, that are revealed by ethnographic analysis. Folk theories influence scientific theories, and vice versa. But real differences exist between folk theorizing and the theories developed by scholars and scientists. Folk theoreticians are not unreflective, but they have not been trained in the tough discipline of searching for contrary evidence. Instead, folk theoreticians often handle contradictions by "erasure" (Gal and Irvine 1995), a kind of inattention that makes contradictory evidence invisible. Consider a sentence invented by the sociologist Stanley Lieberman: "Americans are still prejudiced against blacks." Lieberman found that, even though about 12 percent of Americans *are* Black, Whites seldom notice the contradiction in this statement. This is erasure. In contrast, Lieberman's respondents were startled by another sentence: "Americans still make less money than do whites" (Lieberman 1985:128). For these subjects, "Whites" could stand metonymically for "Americans," but "Blacks" could not.

Folk theorizing uses what scholars call "ad hoc" or "stipulative" explanations for contradictory evidence. For instance, Bashkow (2006) found that Orokaiva people in New Guinea were acquainted with White people who did not match their stereotypes of "Whitemen" (for instance, as very soft-skinned, or as never doing hard physical labor). But they did not conclude from this evidence that their stereotypes were mistaken. Instead, they decided that these White people were simply untypical. Some Orokaiva said that they were probably not real "Whitemen," but reincarnations of dead Orokaiva relatives, returned in disguise.

People use folk theories to interpret the world without a second thought. They are a part of everyday common sense. But they are also more than this. Since common sense is valued, folk theories and categories are not only taken for granted, they are the objects of considerable intellectual and affective investment. I have found on many occasions, in teaching and lecturing, that to question the folk theory of racism elicits from my fellow White Americans a defense of it that is acutely felt and even angry. To challenge this common sense is to become an oddball or a divisive radical.

### The folk theory of race and racism

While anthropologists usually prefer to emphasize diversity, my research suggests that most White Americans share a single set of folk ideas about race and racism. These ideas, which I refer to as the "folk theory of race and racism," attend to so much that is irrelevant, erase so much that is important, and create so many traps and pitfalls that it is probably impossible to develop anti-racist projects within their framework. The folk theory shows up in the talk and text that I will analyze in later chapters. Even more importantly, it shows up in classes and courtrooms, in the deliberations of legislative bodies, in programming on television. Most White readers of this book, and their friends and families, will have invoked it in their own talk and text. It is ubiquitous, and it is taken for granted. So I outline the folk theory here in order that readers can learn to recognize and critique its terms.

The first part of the folk theory holds that "race" is a basic category of human biological variation, and that each human being can be assigned to a race, or, sometimes, to a mixture of races. The folk theory holds that these races are biologically real, the obvious trace of the origins of the American population in historically and biologically distinct geographical populations formed in human evolution. Folk theoreticians do argue that these races may not be permanent, because intermarriage and biological mixing will gradually erase their differences. Thus racism will disappear by itself, since there will be no differences left for racists to notice.

In contrast, most human biologists and social scientists find that the everyday-language category of "race" labels a sociopolitical phenomenon, not the dimensions of human biological diversity that are revealed by research in human genetics and related fields. The everyday-language "races," as products of history and culture, are very real, and they can even have biological effects. But categories like "White" and "Black" are not categories of biological evolution.

The second part of the folk theory holds that racism is entirely a matter of individual beliefs, intentions, and actions. In the folk theory, a racist is a person who believes that people of color are biologically inferior to Whites, so that White privilege is deserved and must be defended. Racism is what this kind of White supremacist thinks and does. The folk theory holds that such people are anachronisms, who are ignorant, vicious, and remote from the mainstream. Their ignorance can be cured by education. Their viciousness can be addressed by helping them to enjoy new advantages, so that they can gain self-esteem and will not have to look down on others. Since education and general well-being are increasing, racism should soon disappear entirely, except as a sign of mental derangement or disability.

One of the most difficult exercises that this book recommends is to move away from thinking of racism as entirely a matter of individual beliefs and psychological states. White Americans generally agree that things happen in the world because individuals, with beliefs, emotions, and intentions, cause them to happen. They consider this understanding to be the most obvious kind of common sense. Yet not everyone approaches the world from this perspective, and it is very interesting to try to think about racism from outside the framework that it imposes. Critical theorists do not deny that individual beliefs figure in racism. But we prefer to emphasize its collective, cultural dimensions, and to avoid singling out individuals and trying to decide whether they are racists or not. Furthermore, critical theorists insist that ordinary people who do not share White supremacist beliefs can still talk and behave in ways that advance the projects of White racism. I will try to show, in chapters to come, how racist effects can be produced in interaction, in an intersubjective space of discourse, without any single person in the interaction intending discrimination.

These first two parts of the folk theory predict optimistically that racism should disappear because intermarriage will blur racial differences, and because better education and advances in human well-being should eliminate the conditions that produce White supremacists. The third major premise of the folk theory, however, is not optimistic. It holds that prejudice is natural to the human condition. All people are thought to make invidious distinctions and "to prefer to be with their own kind." Certainly anthropologists have documented that people around the world make invidious distinctions about every possible dimension of human difference, and the individual and cultural preferences and prejudices shared by many White Americans are no different. But for critical theorists, what is interesting about White racism is not so much its system of invidious distinctions. Instead, of most interest is how Whites are able to use these to distort the allocation of resources among different kinds of people. The magnitude of White power, and the enormity of this distortion, makes White racism a very distinctive phenomenon. Furthermore, critical theorists see that this part of the folk theory, the idea that prejudice is natural, invites Whites to focus, not on their own practices, but on those of their victims. Whites often point out that non-Whites prefer to be with one another. A stereotyped example is self-segregation by seating patterns in school cafeterias, where, it is said, African American students all sit at the same tables by preference. The folk theory locates this behavior on exactly the same moral plane as the preference by all White students to sit together at other tables, and permits Whites to speak of "Black racism" as if it were exactly like White racism. Whites are very fond also of the idea that African Americans often discriminate among one another by color, valuing light skin and wavy hair. Similarly, the political conflict between African Americans and Latinos

receives a great deal of attention in White-dominated media. Clearly reflection on such conflicts is important and satisfying for White Americans, since it relieves them of any distinctive guilt or responsibility.

We can see the folk theory at work in an opinion piece by a young White journalist that was published in the *Arizona Daily Wildcat*, the student newspaper of the University of Arizona (Buchheit 1997). The essay, titled "People even more ignorant than I," was a strongly worded attack on racism as "bunk," which all intelligent people have rejected and only ignorant people have sustained. The author claims to have known three examples of "racists": "Crazy Running Bear, a.k.a.: Scott," a Native American, who "hates the white race," "Nip," a "Korean White Supremacist" (the author assures us that "Nip" really is the nickname of this person and is not intended as a slur), and "mindless, inbred-to-keep-that-white-Aryan-purity-surviving, ignorant skinheads." These examples are contrasted with a "Mexican-American" who is "proud of his heritage, and who he is," but who does not "feel superior to other races" or hate them. These examples illustrate the folk-theory view that racism is a matter of belief held by ignorant people, as well as the idea that anyone can be a racist. The idea of the biological reality of race that will disappear with mixing is presented at the climax of the essay as an argument against the logic of racism: If every racist individual looks into their genealogy, the author writes, "I GUARANTEE that you will find at least one example of some 'inferior' blood line infecting your system, turning you into all that you hate" (Buchheit 1997:5).

This author clearly desires an end to racism, and wants to educate "those few with good hearts, and bad rearing, who are just a bit confused and need a push in some direction." However, the folk theory does not provide him any purchase toward this goal. Instead, it leads him to miss almost completely the ways that racism really works in his world. The essay is notable for its exclusive focus on individual hatreds as opposed to institutional racism and its obvious effects. For instance, the University of Arizona had in 1997 (and unfortunately still has) very small numbers of students of color, especially given the demography of its region. Yet two out of three of the supposed racists mentioned in the essay are people of color, who in real life are much more likely to be the victims of racism than they are to function effectively in advancing racist projects. The only White racists mentioned are "ignorant skinheads." But the University of Arizona is plagued with racist behavior by ordinary White students, not "ignorant skinheads." In the Spring of 2007, a scandal erupted on campus when students posted on their Facebook pages pictures of a party celebrating Martin Luther King Day, where guests came as their favorite Black person. The preferred costume was a "pimp" or "gangsta" outfit, or, for women, to come as a "ho." Members of the African American Student Association

(only 2.8 percent of students at the university are Black) protested, and concerned university administrators convened workshops and forums to reflect on the incident (Smith 2007).

While an undergraduate essay might be expected to be a bit naive, ideas that are identical to those in Mr. Buchheit's *Arizona Daily Wildcat* contribution dominate nearly all public discourse about racism in the United States. The folk theory is deeply embedded in American law (Crenshaw et al. eds. 1995). A 2004 US Supreme Court decision, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, demonstrates that the folk theory is held at the very highest levels of the justice system. In this decision the Court ruled that the University of Michigan could continue to practice certain forms of race-based affirmative action. Justice O'Connor wrote for the majority that "The Court expects that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to favor the interest approved today" (*Grutter v. Bollinger et al.*, 2003). The "interest" mentioned by Justice O'Connor is the desire of American institutions for "diversity." Urciuoli (2003) has shown that "diversity" is often merely a glib label for a form of corporate accommodation to a globalizing world, and has little to do with redressing any history of discrimination. Justice O'Connor's wording clearly reflects the folk-theory idea that education of recalcitrant racists, and racial mixing in "diverse" institutions, will bring the end of racism, and within 25 years at that.<sup>13</sup>

### Race is a Social and Political Fact, Not a Fact of Human Biology

With the folk theory now sketched out, let us develop in more detail some examples of how it works, and how it contrasts with critical and scientific theories of race and racism. First, recall that in the folk theory race is a biological fact of human nature. Most White Americans think that anyone who opposes this idea is simply blind to the obvious. However, human biologists and human geneticists almost universally agree that the "races" and "ethnic groups" – Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a, Asian – that are not only salient in everyday language, but are the categories used by US government agencies going about their official purposes, are not biological units in any ordinary sense.

The word "race" first appears in English in the seventeenth century, and is probably borrowed from the Spanish word *raza*, of uncertain etymology (Smedley 1993:37). *Raza* first appeared in Spanish-language discourses that distinguished Christians of "pure blood," *sangre limpia*, from persecuted descendants of converted Jews and Muslims (Smedley 1993:38; Fredrickson

2002). That is, the word expressed Christian ascendancy, and had little to do with skin color and the other external signs that define race for American English speakers today.

The use of these external signs in folk thinking about race today preserves the scientific biology and anthropology of 50 to 100 years ago. Through the 1960s even university textbooks in biological anthropology labeled the human races with words like Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid, and Australoid. Many Americans still use the scientific-sounding racial terms found in these antiquated sources. Thus Jacobson (1998) points out that the novelist Philip Roth, with a keen ear for American talk, could invent a White woman who insists on the difference between a "Semitic" versus a "Caucasian" race.

Racial typology has not completely disappeared from biological anthropology. Many forensic anthropologists, who are often asked by law enforcement officials to identify human skeletal remains by folk-racial categories (which continue to live in the law), believe that the old racial types are useful in this task and that the malleability of skeletal dimensions under changing environments has been exaggerated.<sup>14</sup> Some African American leaders worry that claims that there is no scientific basis for the idea of race will undermine their arguments for race-based social programs aimed at redressing discrimination. Scholars and scientists who still use the old racial typologies are, however, few and far between. As the mapping of the human genome has revealed more and more sites of human variation, scientists consistently find that this variability never maps neatly onto any of the systems of racial typology that were once taken so seriously.<sup>15</sup> From a biological point of view, humanity has evolved as a single lineage (Templeton 1998).

While biological anthropologists and human geneticists have agreed for at least 30 years that the folk theory of race has no scientific foundation, this consensus is repeatedly presented in the mass media as if it were astonishing breaking news. For instance, *Scientific American*, the leading popular science magazine in the United States, headlined its December 2003 report on the results of the recently completed Human Genome Project with "Science has the answer: Does race exist? Genetic results may surprise you." This line captioned a colorful montage of "morphed" female faces, with skin color graded but facial features identical (a classic iconic representation of the folk idea that race mixing is eroding racial difference).

Not only is this venerable scientific consensus presented in the press as an astonishing novelty, when it is proposed, it is strongly resisted. Many people remain convinced that racial differences, in the folk-theory sense, are important for scientific medicine. Those who advance this view argue that "political correctness" in the form of the denial of the biological reality of race will damage efforts to improve public health and to cure disease in

individuals. The idea that the biological reality of race must be recognized because of the racial association of certain diseases is very robust, in spite of the fact that many human biologists find it controversial or simplistic. In one of the many ironies and contradictions that are the hallmark of the folk theory, this idea was invoked in California during 2003 by anti-racist opponents of Proposition 54, the Racial Privacy Initiative. Proposition 54 would have amended the state constitution to make any reference to race, ethnicity, color, or national origin illegal in regulations governing education, public contracts, or public employment. It was authored by California's foremost advocate of colorblind public policy, Ward Connerly, a prominent African American businessman, who also composed the state constitutional amendment of 1996 that successfully ended affirmative action in public higher education in his state. Connerly believes that any attention to racial differences, as by affirmative action policy, simply perpetuates racism and racist injustice.<sup>16</sup> The argument against his colorblind initiative that found the most purchase with the general public, and that almost certainly was the most important factor in its defeat by a substantial majority of California voters in the election of November 2003, was that it was, as one advertising slogan proposed, "an attack on our health-care system": the proposed amendment would prevent physicians from paying attention to associations between race and disease. This episode strongly reasserted the robust folk idea that race is biologically grounded.

Robert Sussman and Alan Templeton, human biologists at Washington University in St. Louis, sharply disagreed with this position (Hesman 2003). They pointed out that associations between race and disease are merely statistical, so they are of little use in the diagnosis of individual cases. Furthermore, these associations have at least as much to do with poverty and stress – that is, with race as a social and political category – as they do with genetic variation. American racial categories have so little connection with human variation as understood in biology that the contribution to diagnostic precision of "knowing a patient's race" is almost certainly far less significant than the contribution of such "knowledge" to well-documented medical neglect (Brown et al. 2003). People of color, as Templeton noted, deserve the same kind of individualized diagnostic attention that Whites receive: "If you're an individual and you're sick, you don't really care about the averages" (Hesman 2003:A1).

Some scholars argue that racism today is a "New Racism" based on cultural, not biological, discrimination (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Stolcke 1995). But there is much evidence that the idea of "race" among American Whites remains firmly grounded in folk ideas about biology. For instance, the so-called one-drop rule – that one drop of African blood makes a person Black – remains vigorous. In December 2003, six months after the death at the age of 100 of Strom Thurmond, Republican of South

Carolina and one of the strongest segregationist voices in the United States Senate of the 1940s through the 1960s, his 78-year-old daughter Essie Mae Washington-Williams, a light-skinned woman who strongly resembles her father, announced her paternity. In the extensive news coverage, Mrs. Washington-Williams was frequently referred to, in a one-drop-rule locution, as "Senator Thurmond's Black daughter." Out of 75 documents on the Lexis-Nexis database that referred to Mrs. Washington-Williams by race, 24 called her "Black." The others all used folk-racial language, calling her "mixed-race," "bi-racial," or "half and half." Mrs. Washington-Williams's mother, Carrie Butler, was always referred to as "Black" (with lower-case "b" in the original sources).<sup>17</sup> Ms. Butler's exact lineage is unknown to me, but if she was like most African Americans of her generation, she probably had White ancestors. Senator Barack Obama, Democrat of Illinois, is often described as "the only Black member of the United States Senate." Senator Obama is the child of a White American mother and a father from Kenya. Sometimes he, like Mrs. Washington-Williams, is called a "mixed-race" person. But the expression "mixed-race" presupposes the basic integrity of typological races and echoes old ideas of hybridization and miscegenation.

These examples also illustrate the excessive concern on the part of journalists that people of color (but not Whites) be properly labeled by race. American Whites obsess about racial labels (and take that obsession for granted as natural) because they make choices about how to think about other people based on racial categorization. Racial labels shape fundamental perceptions. In a famous study, Rubin (1992; Rubin and Smith 1990) studied how college students respond to the race of instructors. Rubin used a method called a "matched guise." A White female, a native speaker of American English, recorded a four-minute classroom lecture, which was played to groups of randomly selected White students. One group was shown a picture of a White woman, and told that this was the speaker. A second group was shown a picture of a woman with East Asian features, and informed that this woman had recorded the lecture. The two photographs were made in the same setting, and the women were dressed very similarly and were judged to be equal in attractiveness. The students in the "Asian speaker" condition reported that the speaker on the tape had a foreign accent, and, astonishingly, did significantly less well on a follow-up test over the four minutes of material than the students who were told they were hearing a White speaker! The problem could not possibly have been foreign accent – which many White college students feel strongly compromises their ability to learn (Shuck 2004) – since all the students heard exactly the same White American female voice. What Rubin demonstrated was that students will hear a foreign accent even when there cannot possibly be one, simply on the basis of a speaker's appearance, and that this mistaken

perception will affect how much they understand and remember of what is said.

We can see clearly, then, that the folk category of race is much more than a mystification and distortion that has made many people understand historical processes of discrimination and differentiation as simple "biology." The folk theory creates the reality in which Americans live. Understanding it is a requirement for a person who wants to function effectively in American society, where it organizes interactions at all levels. And it can be a life-and-death matter. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (personal communication, January 2004) likes to point out, "Your race is what you are when the cops pull you over at two o'clock in the morning."

Folk categories of race create cultural effects. Members of groups classified as non-White strongly feel the sense of community that results from sharing ways somehow to live with oppression. Cultural formations specific to these groups, which include some of the world's most exciting and admired art, music, and literature, have developed within these communities. Furthermore, social and political race even creates biological effects. The selective pressures on African Americans, who suffer an infant mortality rate of 13.65 per thousand, are different from those on Whites, with a rate of 5.65. Elevated frequencies of hypertension and diabetes among African Americans probably trace partly to the stress of constant exposure to discrimination and partly to the biological consequences of the discrimination-shaped poverty, with its substandard housing, unhealthy diets, and inadequate medical care.

#### Whiteness and the indeterminacy of racial categories

The great majority of anthropologists believe that what most people call "race" is best understood as a social and political reality, and not a biological fact. One reason that they take this view is the evidence of the great flexibility of American racial categories, both official and unofficial, even in recent history. The ways in which people are assigned to a race, even in the official recording of birth certificates and categorization in the United States Census, have changed frequently (Dominguez 1986; Menchaca 1993). Official documents of the US Census are extensively footnoted with cautions that statistics by race are not comparable across the decades, because the racial and ethnic categories in the Census have changed.

When scholars first began to look for evidence that racial categories in the United States are social and political constructions, not biological reality, they often focused on the phenomenon of "passing," cases where light-skinned African Americans successfully lived as Whites. Passing shows that racial categorization is unreliable. More recently, changing ideas of

Whiteness have attracted much attention (Delgado and Stefancic, eds. 1997; McDermott and Samson 2005; Rasmussen et al., eds. 2001). The definition of who is "White" has frequently shifted during US history. In the early years of the American republic, Benjamin Franklin could write that "In Europe the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians, and Swedes are generally of what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who, with the English, make the principal body of white people on the face of the earth. I could wish their numbers were increased" (quoted in Jacobson 1998:40). Franklin wrote long before a famous tract of scientific racism, Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* of 1916, popularized the idea of the Nordic peoples as the prototypical Whites. American Whites today can hardly imagine how Franklin could have seen Swedes and Germans as "swarthy." This example shows how what seem to us today like fundamental perceptions may be of very recent historical origin, in this case, ideas of Whiteness centered on Grant's Nordic stereotype. Contemporary White Americans can no longer see "swarthinness" among Swedes, and find it astonishing that anyone ever did so.

Some ethnic groups thought of as indisputably White today once faced considerable discrimination. Roediger (1991) and Ignatiev (1995) have recorded the "whitening" of Americans of Irish ancestry. Brodtkin (1998) described "How Jews became White folks." Jacobson (1998) illustrates the "manufacture of Caucasians" out of the diversity of European "races" in everyday interactions and in the workings of national institutions during the twentieth century. However, Jacobson points out that while European immigrants, such as the Irish and people from eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, often faced discrimination (and, in the case of Jewish immigrants, anti-Semitism), they were always recognized as White in legal terms under the Naturalization Act of 1790, which admitted "free white persons" to American citizenship. The Naturalization Act of 1870 extended the right of citizenship to "aliens of African nativity . . . and persons of African descent" (Jacobson 1998:227). Jacobson documents a complex give and take throughout the first half of the twentieth century as applicants for citizenship who did not fall clearly into the categories defined in these laws, such as Mexicans, Japanese, Syrians, and South Asians, petitioned the courts to be recognized as White. Menchaca (1993, 2001) reviews the dilemmas faced after the Mexican War of 1848 by Mexicans in the newly conquered American territories. Many of them had African and Native American ancestors, so the full US citizenship rights supposedly guaranteed to Mexicans in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo were withheld from them. Citizenship was not extended to Native Americans until the American Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.

The boundary between Whiteness and Color is always actively contested, as people use diverse means, from "passing" to cultural conformity to legal

confrontation, to become recognized as White. In-between categories are constantly emerging, from the mixed-race categories permitted in the 2000 US Census to local labels like "Melungeon," adopted by people in Appalachia who could identify as "White" but who want to honor their African ancestry (McDermott 2004). The old category of "Creole," long established in southern Louisiana, did not employ the one-drop rule (Dominguez 1986). The diaspora after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 has greatly disrupted identities for this population, because New Orleansians who were "Creole" in the pre-Katrina city are simply "Black" in Houston or Atlanta.

The reverse of "becoming White folks" is racialization into Color, a process today affecting Americans of Middle Eastern ancestry. When I taught at Wayne State University in Detroit from 1968 to 1983, I learned that Arab Americans were known in the region by the racist epithet "sand niggers." A Supreme Court decision of 1981, *Saint Francis College v. Al-Khazraji*, ruled that Arab Americans had standing as complainants against "racial" discrimination (Haney Lopez 2000:167). However, Morsy (1994) argued that Arab Americans had experienced a period of at least tentative assignment as "honorary Whites." The 2000 US Census includes people of Middle Eastern origin in the category "White." This status surely ended, at least unofficially, in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. The small Arab American population in the United States, which includes many highly educated professionals and business people, now finds itself firmly relocated within the zone of Color, and instances of discrimination against Americans of Middle Eastern ancestry, including violence, are today commonplace.

While students of Whiteness emphasize diverse ways of being White (Hartigan 1999, 2005), official US government policy does not acknowledge this. Instead, the US Census homogenizes Whites, but divides people of color into multiple subgroups. Goldberg (1993:78) suggested that this policy is part of a long history of White-dominated institutions using racial taxonomies to "divide and conquer." The 1990 US Census included four non-White possibilities: Black, Hispanic, Asian-Pacific Islander, and American Indian-Alaska Native. The Census of 2000 distinguished "race" from "Hispanic origin," permitted respondents to check more than one box for race, and allowed write-in mixed-race labels like "Irish-Salvadoran-African American." A category "some other race" was also made available, and answers included labels like "Moroccan" and "Belizean." The 2000 Census divided "Asian" into five subcategories, and "Pacific Islander" into three. "Spanish/Hispanic/Latino" was divided into Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban. The category "Black or African American" was not subdivided, a choice which ignores the social salience of some subgroups of the Black population, such as West Indians (immigrants from

the English-speaking Caribbean), Dominicans and Puerto Ricans categorized as "Black" in the United States, and Haitians.

While the folk theory is optimistic that racial mixing will bring the end of racism, 98 percent of respondents to the 2000 US Census checked only one race.<sup>18</sup> Of the slightly more than 6 million people who checked two or more, over a million were Whites claiming to be partly American Indian/Alaska Native. Such a choice by Whites has become a way of staking a romantic claim to American authenticity rather than the revelation of an embarrassing non-White ancestry. Today, it may also advance a claim on new wealth that tribes and bands who have built gambling casinos share among enrolled members.<sup>19</sup> The results of the 2000 Census cannot, of course, be compared to the results of earlier censuses where mixed-race categories were not available to respondents. However, they make clear that only a small minority of Americans choose to be seen officially as mixed-race people.

In contrast to the elaborate subdivisions of people of color seen in the US Census, in many contexts a single social contrast between Color and Whiteness accounts for the ways that White racism plays out in the United States. To make this observation is to take a controversial position, since it moves away from the "Black-White binary" (Perea 1998) and "Black exceptionalism" (Espinoza and Harris 2000): the idea that African Americans were uniquely damaged by economic loss and social-psychological degradations under slavery and Jim Crow, and that African Americans are uniquely centered in White racist imagination as prototypical Others.<sup>20</sup> Much evidence does support Black exceptionalism. Everyday White racism of the type that Davis (2000) calls "micro-aggression" is probably felt most acutely by African Americans. Only African Americans are categorized by the "one-drop rule" (Harrison 1995:60). African Americans exhibit a uniquely low level of intermarriage with Whites (Sanjek 1994; although apparently tolerance for intermarriage is increasing, as noted by Bobo 2001). However, other non-White populations have also suffered a heavy burden of discrimination. American Indians constitute less than 1 percent of the population of the United States. Most Whites never encounter them, and many share positive, albeit essentializing and romanticizing, ideas about Indians. However, Indians were devastated by genocidal attacks that continued into the early twentieth century in some parts of the United States, and by the nearly total expropriation of their land and wealth which continues to this day. Indians encounter every kind of discrimination including stereotyping, ostracism and exclusion, and violence. The adoption of casino gambling as a tribal business on some reservations has led to racist backlash, often led by White gambling interests such as the race-track industry, who encourage Whites to see casino profits as ill-gotten gains, undeserved privileges that Indians in no way deserve to enjoy.

Latinos and Asian Americans are especially likely to be stereotyped as “foreigners” (Lee 2000), but also suffer every other kind of discrimination. The expropriation of property from Mexican Americans by Whites occurred everywhere between 1848 and the end of the twentieth century (Briggs and Van Ness, eds. 1987; Menchaca 1995; Sheridan 1986, 2006). Asian Americans as well suffered the taking of property, as when Japanese Americans were forced to sell their homes, land, and businesses at panic prices when they were removed by force from the West Coast during World War II. Asian Americans encounter “glass ceilings” in business and the professions, even since becoming the “model minority” in the 1980s and 1990s. And Asian Americans also encounter racist violence. The White murderers of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 and Yoshiro Hattori in Baton Rouge in 1992 either received very light prison sentences (in the case of the Chin murder) or were let off without penalty (in the Hattori case). In Spring 2004, as I began to write this chapter, the Asian community of San Jose, California, was mourning the death of Cau Bich Tran and seeking justice for her. Tran was a tiny 25-year-old Vietnamese immigrant mother of two who was killed in her own home on July 13, 2003, by a San Jose police officer. She had called the police for help in opening a locked door. When the officer entered the home, she was holding a Vietnamese-style vegetable peeler, with a six-inch blade, trying to use it to jimmy the door. Since she did not understand English well, she did not drop the peeler when the officer ordered her to do so. He shot her dead, claiming later that the shot had been in self-defense. A grand jury refused to indict the officer for what is widely considered in the local Asian community to have been an act of, if not flat-out murder, at best a manslaughter, a profound error of judgment rooted in racist stereotyping.

Marable (1995) finds that all people of color in the United States confront very similar structural contexts and have very similar experiences with racism. He argues that this circumstance makes obvious the need for political alliances across superficially diverse racial groups. Delgado and Stefancic (2000:226) report that in museum collections of racial memorabilia, “We found striking parallels among the stigma-pictures that society disseminated of the four groups [Mexicans, African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans]. The stock characters may have different names and appear at different times, but they bear remarkable likenesses and seem to serve similar purposes for the majority culture.”

Carey McWilliams (1943) saw many historical and sociological connections among the experiences of people of color. The confrontation with Native Americans by the first colonists shaped the way that their descendants understood Africans brought as slaves. After the Civil War, California politicians anxious to crush the ambitions of Chinese immigrants worked closely with politicians from the Deep South who were forging Jim Crow

segregation. Mexican Americans in the US Southwest, argued McWilliams, filled for Whites a political-economic and ideological site that elsewhere was occupied by African Americans, and were treated accordingly.

Like Marable, Delgado and Stefancic, and McWilliams, I have noticed that there are few differences among kinds of stereotypes that Whites assign to non-White groups. Of course new stereotypes do emerge from time to time, such as the idea that Asian Americans are especially intelligent. As recently as the early 1970s the driving concern of the Chinese community in San Francisco was very similar to that of other US minorities, that public schools were failing their children. *Lau v. Nichols*, a 1972 decision of the US Supreme Court, held that children of Chinese ancestry should have access to bilingual education in Chinese and English to improve their chances of school success. Yet today's media representations of Chinese Americans reflect nothing of this very recent history. To quote a teenaged character in a 2004 film, *The Perfect Score*, the highest scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), used to evaluate potential for success in tertiary education by most US colleges and universities, are earned by "Chinese girls who never watch television." (The message of the film was that other young people are best advised to cheat.)

This new stereotype of high Asian intelligence would seem to be a positive development. Yet when Whites act on it, the result is often discrimination. In 2002 the University of California announced a de-emphasis on SAT scores. This was one of many responses by the university that were said to be aimed at mitigating the drop in matriculation by African American and Latino/a students that followed the passage of a 1996 amendment to the State Constitution that prohibited using race as a criterion for admission. But many Asian Americans believe that de-emphasizing SAT scores discriminates against their children, who do well on these tests. Since for many years Asian American children faced explicit restrictive quotas, their suspicion that the de-emphasis on SAT results aims to keep them from dominating university admissions is reasonable (Izumi 2002).

### White racism as culture

The folk-theory insistence that racism is entirely a matter of individual beliefs and prejudices contrasts sharply with critical theories of racism. David Theo Goldberg, one of the most prominent critical theorists, argues that racism is a cultural phenomenon that exists in publicly circulating discourses (Goldberg 1993:92). Goldberg's theory does have a place for beliefs and intentions. However, counter to the folk theory that sees racist beliefs as anachronistic and irrational, Goldberg has argued that they are often quite rational (Goldberg 1999). Goldberg's theory of racist culture (Goldberg

1990, 1993, 1997) does a much better job of explaining the forms and practices of language explored in this book than does the folk theory. The diverse critical theorists who emphasize cultural approaches to racism do not necessarily share all of Goldberg's views. But his theory of racist culture opens up some very useful analytic opportunities.

Goldberg sees racism as a set of "discourses," taking this term from the work of Foucault (see especially Foucault 1972). Foucault uses "discourses" to label sets of fundamental principles that organize the world. Discourses divide rationality from irrationality, truth from error, madness from sanity. They make some things in the world noticeable and discussible, and others invisible, and, in the last analysis, even create "things" themselves. Discourses are not superficial beliefs and practices imposed over a more fundamental way of being. Instead, for Foucault we live in the world only through discourses, and we cannot think or speak outside them. The anthropologist Audrey Smedley captured this dimension of racist culture when she described White racism as a "world view," as "a culturally structured, systematic way of looking at, perceiving, and interpreting various world realities . . . [that] actively, if not consciously, mould . . . the behavior of their bearers" (Smedley 1993:17). Feagin (2006) proposes that a systematic and enduring White racial "frame" generates racializing meanings and associated discriminatory actions. The notion of a "frame," from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), implies a contextualizing perspective, an angle or point of view that endows a racialized world with common-sense properties. Systems of constraint on thought like discourses, world views, and frames exist below the level of consciousness. They are invisible to us, and yet constitute our world. Critical theories of racism aim to make them visible, to parse their terms and logics, and to interrupt their terms with constructive alternative anti-racist discourses.

To understand White racism<sup>21</sup> as culture, as discourse, as world view, or as a generative frame for thought explains why race and racially based practices become common sense. Each time this common sense plays out in talk and behavior, these fundamental ideas become available anew, and people use them to understand what has happened and to negotiate interaction. This constant feedback is dynamic, and White racism at different times and places can be quite diverse. This flexible racism is highly adaptable. Stoler (1997) argues that social formations like capitalism, or colonialism, or liberalism, or modernity, which are sometimes considered preconditions for racism, do not predict it. Instead, she finds that racism can parasitize almost any social formation or political system, and be articulated within almost any economic or political discourse.

Years of grappling with the idea of "culture" (see Brightman 1995 for a summary of recent debates) has led anthropologists to use the term to refer, not to a timeless system that is given to its inheritors as an inflexible

package of ideas and practices, but to a set of collective projects that must be continually renewed by the action of human agents. The collective property of cultural projects makes them seem natural, as it is difficult for members to imagine a world other than the one in which so many people move about and speak and act in ways that are intelligible to them. It also makes them effective; since such collective practices create worlds, they make sense and are efficacious within those worlds. But anthropologists have found that such collective projects are never complete, in at least two senses. First, the necessarily diverse kinds of memberships in large collective projects imply that there will always be members who are marginal to them, or who are positively disadvantaged by them and thus resist them. Within a set of cultural projects as enormous as those of White racism, participants will have many different reasons for acting, and these reasons may change even during brief spans of time. Some participants may be in outspoken and active practical opposition even to ideas that seem fundamental. However, such "resistance" does not necessarily lead to interruption of the cultural project. Indeed, it may be entirely constituted within its logics, merely turning their elements on their heads without interrupting their most fundamental presuppositions. Thus resistance runs the risk of powerfully reinscribing a cultural project by both implicitly and explicitly evoking its ideas and making them public once again (Abu-Lughod 1990).

The second reason that cultural projects are never complete is that their logics always contain internal contradictions and lapses. For instance, the *sistema de castas*, the system of racial categories enshrined in law throughout Latin America in the colonial period, broke down due to sheer complexity during the last years of the eighteenth century (Van den Berghe 1978). The *sistema de castas* included almost every imaginable ratio of racial intermixtures among people of European, African, and American Indian descent. A few such labels, like "mulatto," "quadroon," and "octoroon," appeared in English as well. When this system broke down, White racism in countries like Brazil (Harris 1964) and Nicaragua (Lancaster 1991) shifted the basis of racial categories from genealogy to color. The baroque proliferation of racial categories recognized in the 2000 United States Census may hint that White racism in the United States is also close to a new phase.

We can understand White racism as constituted loosely by a set of cultural projects. Keeping in mind that these are never complete, that they exhibit considerable internal diversity, and that they encounter resistance and exhibit gaps and contradictions, I have found that four projects of White racist culture in the United States in the twenty-first century account for most of the data that I discuss in this book. These are: (1) the production of a taxonomy of human types; (2) the assignment of individuals and groups within the taxonomy of types through "racialization" or "racial formation" (Omi and Winant 1994); (3) the arrangement of these types in

a hierarchy; and (4) the movement of resources, both material and symbolic, from the lower levels of the hierarchy to the upper levels in such a way as to elevate Whiteness and denigrate and pejorate Color.

The first project, toward a taxonomy of human types, reached a local peak in the baroque systems of the United States Census of 2000. But this cultural project dates from the early modern period, when it was entwined in the evolution of biological science itself. The Linnean taxonomy – *Homo afer*, *Homo americanus*, *Homo asiaticus*, *Homo europus* – reflects the same impetus to the identification of human types that is seen in the 2000 Census categories of “White,” “Black or African American,” “American Indian or Alaska Native,” “Asian or Pacific Islander,” “Hispanic or Latino,” “Non-Hispanic White,” and “Two or More Races,” nomenclature which reflects the political struggles of our own day. But nearly all combatants share a common underlying logic, that a world of racial types is meaningful, and one without them is disorderly and lacks meaning.

The second project is the assignment of individuals and groups to the categories of the racial taxonomy. This process, often called “racialization,” is accomplished in court rulings that determine whether a person or group is a member, or not, of a category of persons eligible for affirmative action. It is accomplished when Americans, often at a glance, assign one another to racial categories (a glance that can have life-and-death consequences, as in the forms of split-second racial inferencing accomplished by gun-toting citizens and police officers described by Armour 2000). Racialization is accomplished when individuals themselves claim or reject memberships. For instance, immigrants to the United States from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean often take up quite different locations in American society based on accidents of appearance and individual life histories, with even members of a single sibling group variously choosing White, Latino/a, or Black categories and walking, talking, eating, singing, dancing, dating, etc., differently depending on which racial choice seems most favorable (Rodríguez 1994). Racialization is dynamic even within the lifetimes of single individuals, as with the 6 million people who changed from being members of single races in the 1990 US Census to being at least bi-racial in the Census of 2000. Racialization can even be dynamic over a few minutes of interaction, as shown by Bailey (2000) for a Dominican American teenager. However, all this real-life dynamism is often erased by an ideology that a person’s race is fixed at conception, and that others must be able to determine that race in order to know how to act in reference to that person.

The third goal is the arrangement of racial categories within a hierarchy. This is the project that produces what I will call, throughout this book, “White virtue,” the idea that Whites are highest in the hierarchy because their qualities deserve this arrangement. In the history of the United States, federal and state legislation and court decisions that permitted slavery and

Jim Crow segregation enshrined White supremacy for hundreds of years, but many Whites see their ascendancy, not as a historical product, but as a moral imperative. Whiteness is associated with virtue, thought to reside in White "culture." Color is associated with vice, rooted in supposed cultural deficits and historical stigma (Loury 2002). One of the most notorious articulations of this idea of a moral hierarchy was made by Professor Lino Graglia of the University of Texas School of Law in 1997, in a comment on *Hopwood v. Texas*, resolved by the 5th US Circuit Court of Appeals in a decision which halted affirmative action measures in the Texas state universities. Graglia, who approved of the Hopwood decision, was quoted widely as having said,

Blacks and Mexican-Americans are not academically competitive with whites in selective institutions. It is the result primarily of cultural effects. It seems to be the case that, various studies seem to show blacks and Mexican-Americans spend much less time in school. They have a culture that seems not to encourage achievement. Failure is not looked upon with disgrace.<sup>22</sup>

Any scholar familiar with the relevant literature – and indeed, any person who had ever spent much time among African Americans and Mexican Americans – would know that many members of these groups value educational achievement at least as highly as do Whites, and abandon it as a goal for themselves and their children only in the face of the direst economic constraints, after failing in battles against discrimination, or after assessing the battle as a hopeless one. Much of the differential achievement of children of color in secondary education is explicable by the fact that the schools that serve them – which remain largely segregated even 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* – are simply not providing a very good education. In addition, social-psychological factors involving anxiety and distrust, so-called "stereotype threats," that are shaped by years of the experience of discrimination have been found to account for differential achievements on standardized tests by Black and White students in universities (Steele 1997). Since the quantitative effects are found among Latinos and African Americans regardless of social class, it is highly unlikely that they result from some sort of universally shared "culture" of US minorities. There is no concept of "culture" in anthropology, or indeed in any branch of the social sciences, that would encompass everyone from working-class Mexican immigrants to well-to-do African American professionals. What Professor Graglia meant by "culture" was nothing more than a euphemism, a socially acceptable relabeling of the folk-theoretic category of "race." However, his statement was greeted very widely by commentators in the mass media as expressing and explaining an "uncomfortable truth" that the forces of political correctness had attempted to suppress (e.g. Horowitz 1997).

The moral dimension of racial hierarchy is continually reasserted in the United States today by attention in the mass media, often couched in deceptively sympathetic language, to social problems confronted by communities of color – high rates of incarceration, health problems, school failure, and unemployment – that are treated as the results of cultural and personal inadequacies rather than as products of White racism. This media attention often includes the publication of authoritative-seeming statistics showing members of minority populations lagging behind Whites. This reassertion of hierarchy by quantitative method is exacerbated by stereotypical visual representations in all forms of media, as when photographs of African American women illustrate newspaper articles on work-for-welfare programs, or when the role of drug kingpin in action movies is filled routinely by a Latino actor.

The denial of racism, and the performance of what are taken to be anti-racist gestures, is one way of constituting White virtue. Whites like the student journalist who wrote the *Arizona Daily Wildcat* op-ed essay that I used to illustrate the folk theory of racism find it easy to think about people of color as racists, but very difficult to think about White racists. White virtue is protected by projecting racism onto an imagined category of “skinheads” and “Ku Kluxers” that Whites seldom encounter in real life. White virtue is also constructed through creating “honorary Whites,” whose presence in worlds shaped entirely by White power serves as a sign that Whites who associate with them and give them recognition are not racist. Significant examples today include public figures whose careers are often cited by Whites to demonstrate that race is no longer a problem for Americans. However, Whites are not comfortable when such people exhibit styles and expressions that are distant from White norms. The most famous example of the requirement of this kind of cultural conformity is the case of Bill Cosby and his immensely popular 1980s television show. Williams (1995:195) has pointed out how visible signs of everyday Black ways of life were gradually erased from the show, shaping it, in the view of many African Americans, into a show about White people who happened to look Black.

White racist culture works to shift both material and symbolic resources from the bottom of the racial hierarchy, Color, to the top, Whiteness. This project, the movement of resources, yields what I will call, following McIntosh (1989), “White privilege.” Lipsitz (1998) assembles data showing that much of the economic history of the United States can be understood as a vast capture by Whites of resources from people of color, from the labor of Black slaves, to the lands and wealth of American Indians, to the land and water rights of Mexican Americans, continuing today in the super-exploitation and under-compensation of the working poor – a group that includes a high percentage of people of color. I will illustrate the

construction of White privilege with the example of residential segregation, which creates White wealth at the same time that it creates poverty in communities of color. Residential segregation will also show us how White privilege and White virtue are intertwined, each feeding the other.

White privilege, White virtue, and residential segregation: A case study in White racist culture

Residential segregation is a conspicuous feature of contemporary American life. It illustrates how racial disparities result from very complex intersections of individual and institutional choices that share only the presupposition that "race" is a meaningful human category. Residential segregation is simply too complex, too far-reaching, and too historically specific to be satisfactorily explained by the folk theory idea that "people prefer to be with their own kind" (which, of course, presupposes that by "own kind" we mean "own race"). But residential segregation also illustrates how White racist culture can be perpetuated in a sort of closed loop of feedback as Whites gain credit and people of color are discredited through this practice.

Race-based discrimination against people of color in access to housing (both householder-owned and rental) and financing for housing (including mortgages and related housing-based financial instruments) has been illegal in the United States for over 30 years. However, residential segregation has persisted. New forms of discrimination constantly develop, making racial discrimination in housing a "moving target" (Massey 2005). Residential segregation can be expressed quantitatively through the "dissimilarity index," which measures the evenness of distribution of populations across metropolitan areas. The index represents the percentage of people in a particular group who would have to change their place of residence to achieve a racially even distribution. A dissimilarity index of 0 represents complete integration, a dissimilarity index of 1 represents complete segregation. Table 2 gives the dissimilarity indices for African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans (combined with Pacific Islanders), as against Whites, for the last three US Censuses. Table 2 shows that in the year 2000, 64 percent of African Americans would have had to move into new neighborhoods in order to reach complete integration with Whites. The figures in Table 2, for the entire nation, miss some appalling extremes: In New York, Chicago, and Detroit, Black/White dissimilarity indexes run higher than 80 percent, and Latino/White indexes exceed 60 percent in many metropolitan areas (Friedman and Squires 2005).

These statistics are highly visible on the ground in American cities in the twenty-first century, in inner-city ghettos and even entire cities and

**Table 2** Residential segregation of major non-White populations for all US metropolitan areas<sup>23</sup>

	<i>African Americans</i>	<i>Hispanics</i>	<i>Asian Americans</i>
1980	0.727	0.502	0.405
1990	0.678	0.500	0.412
2000	0.640	0.509	0.411

inner suburbs inhabited largely by people of color, surrounded by sprawling outer suburbs inhabited largely by Whites. This pattern is not a primordial result of the desire of people to be with their own kind. Instead, it developed largely within the last 75 years (Lipsitz 1998). In 1934 the Federal Housing Administration began to underwrite private mortgage loans. This keystone program of President Roosevelt's New Deal aimed to stimulate the economy, devastated by the Great Depression, by promoting the construction of housing and home ownership. In the early 1950s a massive program of highway construction, justified as necessary to national defense and security, permitted the spread of suburbs at a hitherto unimagined pace as developers sought cheap land outside of cities. Global domination by the United States after World War II guaranteed the low prices for gasoline that permitted even working-class Whites to commute long distances from the sprawl of the suburbs to jobs in cities.

While today's suburbs arose during a period when overtly White supremacist attitudes were still widely accepted in the United States, segregation was not an explicit goal of suburbanization. Instead, suburbanization was thought of as the pursuit of a better, healthier life for families. However, people of color were excluded from this pursuit, because even people who did not dislike or fear African Americans shared the view that their presence in neighborhoods "lowered property values." For this reason, until the 1964 Civil Rights Act, mortgages backed by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) were not available to African Americans.<sup>24</sup> By encouraging residential "covenants" that prohibited resale to people of color, the FHA policed the suburbs against African American residents even beyond the reach of the jurisdiction it had over the holders of its primary mortgages. In the western United States, these restrictive covenants often also prohibited homeowners from reselling to "Mexicans," "Japanese," or other excluded racial categories. The same concern for "property values" led to mortgage redlining<sup>25</sup> in cities, where people of color remained because they were blocked from moving to suburbs. Redlining made it impossible for city dwellers to acquire mortgages for new purchases of housing, or to finance improvements in housing already owned, and resulted in the deterioration of urban housing stock.

Many of the decisions and practices that produce residential segregation are not racist in the perspective of the folk theory, which requires that racists hold an explicit belief in the biological inferiority of people of color. Nor were they irrational. Instead, within a regime of private property and an understanding that the national economy results from the workings of markets, the idea of "protecting property values" against people stereotyped as deficient in the role of homeowners and householders made eminent good sense. Note, though, that in this case the property values that were protected were those of White citizens and taxpayers. The property values of people of color were eroded by these very same policies.

All White Americans will be familiar with the many kinds of rationalizations that are available as one chooses a place to live. Even a White person with impeccably anti-racist credentials might guiltily decide to live in a predominantly White suburb simply because of its many amenities: a fine system of parks and libraries, good schools, a low crime rate, etc. A second White homeowner might believe that a home is an investment, choosing the suburbs over the city in order to get a better return on her money. A third might fear and detest people of color, and want to live as far away from them as possible, regardless of expense. Only the last decision would be considered racist within the folk theory. The first two types of decisions do prioritize a comfortable lifestyle or a good return on investment over life among diverse neighbors. Most White Americans would probably find the opposite priority to be praiseworthy – but eccentric – anti-racist heroism. But all of these decisions except the eccentric one result in residential segregation when the same latitude for decision is not available to people of color. People of color may rightly fear ostracism or even violence from suburban neighbors. They may be too poor to move to the suburbs. Today, actual denial of home financing on racial grounds is rare, but recent studies have shown that people of color are much more likely than Whites to be steered into the "sub-prime" mortgage market, and even into its criminal sectors where mortgage money is available only under predatory and fraudulent terms.<sup>26</sup>

The material facts of the world that residential segregation creates prop up White stereotypes about people of color. The high crime, poor schools, declining housing stock, poverty, noise, and dirt of cities and inner suburbs become associated with the idea of color. Since White Americans do not know about the history of suburbanization and the role of explicitly exclusionary policies by their government and their financial institutions in this history – and often resist confronting these facts when they are pointed out – the amenities of the suburbs become, not the sign of the accretion of White privilege throughout a racist history, but a sign of suburban virtue, that is to say, of White virtue. And urban decay becomes a material sign

of the vices of Color, or even of essential properties of people of color. Thus a non-White applicant for a mortgage may be profiled by a prime-market bank officer as likely to take poor care of property, or to default on the mortgage, because of supposed essential inclination. And a family of color living in an immaculate home in an expensive suburban neighborhood may be seen as "exceptional," their very success and accomplishment indexing the stereotype, calling it up in the thoughts of their neighbors: "We have a Mexican family next door, and they do a beautiful job with their yard. Their children are quiet and well behaved and we've never had to worry about a thing." Who would say: "We have a White family next door, and . . ."? And so the circle of the cultural project of White racism tends to close. Not completely, because cultural projects are never closed, but residential segregation is an exceptionally tangled and dense fact of White racism.

There is resistance, of course. A long series of legal battles made the classic forms of mortgage redlining illegal, and anti-redlining legislation and judicial precedent are among the very few areas of American anti-discrimination law where the courts have held that discriminatory *effects* can justify a finding of illegal discrimination, even when belief and intention cannot be demonstrated.<sup>27</sup> Substantial changes in the culture of the real estate industry mean that people of color are today less likely to experience discriminatory treatment from real estate and rental agents (Ross and Turner 2005). But fair housing projects by a variety of non-governmental organizations continually battle against such discrimination, which remains significant. Residential segregation is difficult to fight in a period of gross economic inequality, where rising unemployment and falling wages among precisely the sectors of the labor market where many people of color have historically found employment exist alongside skyrocketing housing prices and gentrification. In spite of court decisions ruling that such practices are illegally discriminatory (see note 27), it is common for residential developments to make no provision for housing for working-class (or even middle-class) people, with a consequent differential impact on people of color. In many American cities today, less than one-third of households are qualified to purchase a median-priced home. This crisis of affordability inflicts long-term damage on family wealth, and exacerbates racially based economic inequality. People of color trapped in rented residences in inner cities experience a loss of wealth, while suburban property owners, who are largely White, build wealth as property values rise, and because they benefit from tax policies that permit deductions from income taxes of even enormous mortgages, that are very permissive about gains from loans against home equity, and that allow generous roll-overs and exclusions of capital gains from sale of a primary residence. Primary homeowner-occupied residences, unlike rented residences, also receive very favorable treatment in

the bankruptcy codes of many states, an important protection against the loss of wealth.

Thus economic advantages that can be found in real estate markets accrue largely to Whites. These advantages feed back into increasing disparities between cities and suburbs. In the United States infrastructures such as schools, libraries, museums, parks, roads, policing, sanitation, and communications depend very heavily on the tax base of local municipalities and counties, and much less on state and federal-level investment. As wealth drains from cities, the tax base collapses there as well, and the capacity of a city to maintain a decent quality of life collapses with it. Even White property owners in cities lose wealth, teaching a stern lesson to those who might want to make the anti-racist choice of inner-city residence. A dire example of what this vicious circle can yield is the collapse of the great city of Philadelphia, graphically described in Buzz Bissinger's heartbreaking *A Prayer for the City* (1997). In summary, residential segregation is a classic vicious circle, and one which very few American cities have been able to avoid or redress.

Most Whites find it easy to ignore residential segregation. I experienced a good example of this inattention when I told a lunch-table's worth of White colleagues at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences about the linguist John Baugh's project on "linguistic profiling" (Baugh 2003). Baugh has developed a matched-guise test in which a single speaker uses a "White professional," a "Latino," or a "Black" voice in making telephone inquiries about the availability of advertised rentals in the San Francisco Bay area. The "White professional" voice is much more likely to yield an invitation to make an appointment to look at the property, while the other accents are more likely to result in a response that the rental is no longer available. My colleagues, all sophisticated scholars, were genuinely surprised at this result; several mentioned that they had thought that this sort of discrimination had long since disappeared.

Life at the Center also provided a very good example of discourse silence about residential segregation. The Center, located in the hills above the campus of Stanford University and the city of Palo Alto, California, is very concerned that its fellows be members of a residential community, and insists that they live within an easy commuting distance. Here is the statement on residence from the 2003–04 Fellows' Manual:

As you know, residence must be in proximity to the Center (i.e., Atherton, Los Altos, Menlo Park, Mountain View, Palo Alto, Portola Valley, Redwood City, Stanford). This requirement specifically excludes San Francisco, Berkeley, other communities in the East Bay, and Santa Cruz.

What is interesting here is a town that is not mentioned in the list of "i.e.'s": East Palo Alto. East Palo Alto borders Palo Alto on the east, and is no further from the Center than Mountain View or Redwood City. I doubt that the Center intended to rule out residence in East Palo Alto. Instead, it is probably not mentioned because it would simply almost never occur to anyone who moves in the Bay Area academic world to want to live there, even though the savings in rent might be considerable. East Palo Alto is the only town in the golden chain of expensive bedroom suburbs strung between San Francisco and San Jose with a substantial concentration of African American residents, and it is notorious for its high crime rate. The failure to mention the town constitutes the Center as a space of privilege, which is to say as a White space. And, since naming East Palo Alto might require a cautionary note, this erasure also constitutes the Center as a site of virtue, of people who would not make any invidious distinctions among local communities. The town simply vanishes from the mental map shared by those who designed the Center's literature.<sup>28</sup>

The case of residential segregation shows that we cannot understand White racism as residing exclusively in individual beliefs about the inferiority of people of color and the superiority of Whites. Instead, it shows how a wide range of motives and behaviors, many of them perfectly rational, and many kinds of silences and inattentions that are at first glance entirely inoffensive, work together to create racist institutions and outcomes. Residential segregation remains stable, decreasing slightly nationwide during the last two decades among African Americans (yet remaining at very high levels in many cities), and even slightly increasing among Asians and Pacific Islanders and Hispanics, as shown in Table 2.<sup>29</sup> Residential segregation cannot be due to the actions of a vicious minority of White supremacists. Ezekiel (1995:xxi) reports statistics gathered by the Center for Democratic Renewal and the Southern Poverty Law Center showing that the militant White racist movement had only about 25,000 "hard-core members," perhaps another 150,000 "sympathizers" who might actually pay for literature or attend rallies, and approximately another 450,000 people who read movement literature. This last number is probably higher now that Internet accessibility means that pamphlets and newsletters do not have to be passed around from hand to hand. However, this is still a very small number of people, who are stigmatized by their fellow citizens and harassed by law enforcement agencies. The importance of their occasional acts of violence should not be underemphasized – they are rightly feared, and such fear does play a role in decisions by people of color about where to live. But it is surely obvious that in order to create a pattern at the national scale of American residential segregation, the vast majority of Whites, including White elites and Whites who do not consider themselves to be racist within

the terms of the folk theory, must somehow be participating. Their participation simultaneously stems from and reproduces White racism as a set of cultural projects and generative principles that are fundamental to the production of White culture and identity in the United States. These cultural projects are not marginal or archaic. They are an active, productive, and dynamic contemporary reality that shapes the beliefs and behaviors of Whites in every sphere of life, and that produces the racial reality in which they, and the populations of color subordinated within this reality, must live.

## Chapter 4

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# Gaffes: Racist Talk without Racists

### **Introduction: Gaffes, Personalism, and Moral Panics**

“Gaffes,” like slurs, are visible to White Americans as racist language. Like slurs, gaffes attract metalinguistic and metapragmatic discourse. But when an utterance is called a gaffe or a “slip,” the discourse that follows is interestingly different from that around slurs. As we saw in Chapter 3, to call a word a slur entails that the speaker is a racist as defined in the folk theory: a Ku Kluxer or a redneck. Those accused of uttering slurs can defend themselves against this charge of racism by insisting that the utterance in question is “not a slur.” In the case of gaffes or slips, the defense focuses, not on the words, but on the speaker. The speaker is defended as “not a racist,” but as someone who has uttered racist words without having racist beliefs or intentions. The actual linguistic content of slurs and gaffes can be identical; one commentator’s slur is another’s gaffe. And both types of metalinguistic discourses – defending words in the case of slurs, but speakers in the case of gaffes – reproduce racializing stigma, protect White virtue, and advance White privilege by denying the existence of White racism.

#### Personalist linguistic ideology

Because metalinguistic discourse around gaffes focuses on persons and their beliefs and intentions, it permits us to explore an important theoretical question, the relationship between ideologies of language – interested ideas about how language is organized and what it is for – and ideologies of persons (Woolard 1998:3). Many Whites in the United States share a linguistic ideology called “personalism” (Duranti 1993; Rosaldo 1981). Personalism insists that each individual has an invisible interior self which is the site of beliefs and intentions and emotional states such as love and

hatred. Personalist ideology permits us to say that when a speaker speaks, he or she “means” something. That is, meaning resides not only in the content of words, as determined by baptismal ideology, but in what speakers intend by uttering them. Because of these intentions, words not only represent the world, they represent the inner states of persons. The task of interlocutors is to retrieve meaning by assessing those states. Personalist ideology invites attention to speaker intentions even in the most mundane interactions. For instance, a passenger giving directions who has just told a driver to “Turn left!” can offer as a legitimate apology, when the maneuver gets them to the wrong place, “Oh, I didn’t mean ‘left’, I meant ‘right’.” And of course speakers accused of being rude or insulting can excuse themselves by saying, “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Alongside speaker intentions, speaker beliefs are crucial for personalist linguistic ideologies. Speakers are supposed to choose their words (which, as we learned in Chapter 3, are often understood within the terms of the baptismal ideology of meaning to have an inherent meaning that corresponds to the truth of the world) to correctly represent their beliefs. Personalist and referentialist linguistic ideologies intersect, because referentialist ideology, with its focus on accurate communication, holds that people should believe what is true (Sweetser 1987). So, just as they assess intentions, interlocutors must be able to assess beliefs. For instance, personalist ideology permits a distinction between a “lie,” where a speaker uses words that do not match their beliefs in order to mislead, and an error, where a speaker uses words that match their beliefs, but the beliefs are wrong.

Personalist linguistic ideology also permits the recognition of forms of talk such as irony and parody. In order to recognize irony, interlocutors must be able to assess the speaker’s state of belief and infer that the speaker could not really believe the meaning of the words as uttered. For instance, if someone mentions President George W. Bush, and I, a life-long lefty, contribute an aside like “America’s greatest president,” people who know me would understand the remark to be ironic. In order to understand talk or text as parody, an even more complex assessment is required. A fascinating example occurred during a notorious incident that took place on November 18, 2006. The actor Michael Richards, famous for his role as Seinfeld’s zany neighbor Kramer on the long-running television sitcom *Seinfeld*, was performing in Los Angeles at a comedy club, the Laugh Factory. A party of African American guests was being seated and ordering drinks during his act, when Richards, apparently annoyed at the disturbance, began to scream “Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!” A cell-phone video of the incident posted on many Internet sites<sup>1</sup> revealed that initially the audience was confused, waiting for the joke that would reveal these cries to be a parody of a racist display, since Richards had no reputation as a bigot. Indeed, several audience members interviewed later confirmed that they

had thought at first that the words were leading into a comedy sketch. When the anticipated punchline did not come, audience members began to shout Richards down with cries of "Oh my God" and "That's uncalled for, man." But the pause of a second or two before these shouts began was extremely telling. During this interval, the audience obviously was processing the kinds of inferences that are invited by personalist ideology: Does he really believe that? Did he really mean to say that? Is he the kind of person that would say that seriously, or is this a joke? The incident shows that even this most censurable of all slurs was not reflexively unacceptable. Instead, personalist ideology permitted it to be treated, at least briefly, as a moment in which Richards parodied the voice of a stereotypical racist, a voice that was not "his own."

Rosaldo (1981) pointed out that personalist ideology appears in the core literature of pragmatics and the philosophy of language. The elaboration of Speech Act theory by the philosopher John Searle (1969) postulates that interlocutor's access to speaker's intentions and beliefs (and speaker's access to interlocutor's beliefs and intentions) is required for speech acts to be accomplished. Grice's (1975) analysis of the production of meaning in conversation similarly requires that speakers and hearers be able to make inferences about one another's beliefs and intentions.

Keane (2002) has pointed out that personalist ideology is linked to referentialist ideology, which holds that the most important function of language is "reference," to label a pre-existing world and to convey true statements about it (Silverstein 1976). As noted above, referentialism is linked to personalism by an understanding that beliefs should be true, that they should match the world. Utterances should precisely reflect these true beliefs (Sweetser 1987). Failures to conform to this correspondence are discreditable. If beliefs do not match truth, this is a sign of ignorance. If utterances do not reflect beliefs, they are lies. Both ignorance and lying are moral failures of speakers. Personalism, with its characteristic appeals to intentions, provides escape clauses for both ignorance and lying, but these require the use of the complex apparatus of inference made available precisely by personalist ideology itself.

Personalism and referentialism are invisible to those who share them. They are simply taken for granted, and, when they are pointed out, people find them commonsensical and simply right. However, anthropologists have encountered societies in which personalism and referentialism are not dominant. In a pioneering paper Rosaldo (1981) showed that the Ilongot of the Philippines find the act most prototypical of human talk to be, not the communication of a truth, but a kind of command called *tuydek*. For instance, a husband might say to his wife, "Bring me my betel nut chewing equipment." Interpreting such a command involves not interpretation of the husband's intentions (Does he really mean it? Did he say it to annoy?),

but understanding of his position in a hierarchy of humans arranged according to "passion," a potential for action and motion possessed in full measure by men. Men must command women, who would otherwise lack motivation, as a part of their responsibility to order the world. Duranti (1993), examining Samoan understandings of language, found that for them meaning lies in the social results of utterances, and not in speaker intention. Coleman and Kay (1981) and Sweetser (1987) show that middle-class White Americans define a "lie" as an utterance made with the intention to deceive. Duranti found that Samoans hold any utterance that turns out to be consequentially wrong to be a lie, regardless of speaker intention. Thus what in mainstream White American language ideology would count as a perfectly sincere statement, like "I'm bringing guests for dinner tonight, so set two extra places," for Samoans could become a lie if the guests cancelled at the last minute, leaving food to go to waste and the host inconvenienced. Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) pointed out that Samoan adults do not speculate about the meanings of unintelligible utterances by small children. Only when the words are clear are they thought to be meaningful; the idea that the child intends a meaning, and that adults are charged with figuring out what that intention is, so reasonable to American White middle-class parents, is quite irrational for Samoans. For them, meaning is public, not an internal state of some person.

African Americans in some contexts permit departures from personalism. Mitchell-Kernan (1972) points out that African American ideologies of interaction place as much responsibility for the production of meaning on the hearer as on the speaker. For instance, Mitchell-Kernan reports an incident when one woman became angry at a perceived insult from another. The speaker said of the angry woman's reaction, "I wasn't signifying on her, but I always say that if the shoe fits, wear it." In teaching, I have often illustrated this point with a television interview I heard in 1989 or 1990, during an early episode of panic over misogynist language in rap music precipitated by 2 Live Crew's album *As Nasty as they Wanna Be*. The rapper being interviewed defended this kind of language, asserting, "When I say 'bitch', you don't have to turn around." Morgan (2001) calls this "baited indirectness"; the hearer must accept the bait for meaning to be generated. Another dimension of the public, interactional nature of meaning in African American linguistic ideology is that a speaker can be strongly blamed for a slight or insult, even if, from a personalist perspective, it was done "unintentionally" (Morgan 1999).

Philips (2004) has pointed out the problem of "ideological multiplicity," that ideological systems are often neither homogeneous nor very coherent. The distinctive discourses appropriate to different contexts in a single society may express diverse linguistic ideologies. Ideological multiplicity can be observed in metalinguistic discourse around gaffes. For instance, a

metalinguistic discourse exists that holds that banter, joking, and flattery permit and even require insincere talk, which departs from the referentialist ideal. Within such contexts, speakers are allowed to separate what they say from what they believe. Indeed, they may insist that it is unfair to suggest that they believe what they say in such contexts. Such “light talk” is a very important site for the explicit use of racist language by White Americans, and Feagin (2006:207) has found that White speakers very often claim that they were “only joking” when interlocutors accuse them of having made a racist utterance. That is, they claim that what they said did not match what they believe, and that this does not discredit them. Note, however, that this excuse remains personalist. While “light talk” permits words to be separated from beliefs, speaker intentions must be evaluated in order to determine that the context is indeed one of light talk and joking.

### Moral panics and their metacultural function

Racist utterances by public figures precipitate episodes that I label here “moral panics” (adapting this term from Cohen 1972), which play out in mass media firestorms where the potentially offensive utterance is repeated again and again over days and even weeks, both by those who intend to discredit the speaker and by those who intend to support and defend him. These debates take the form of intricate personalist discourses in which folk psychology is deployed to explore every dimension of the speaker’s selfhood. Furthermore, every detail of the context of the utterance is examined in order to evaluate speaker intentions. In these discourse events, personalist and referentialist language ideologies play a “metacultural” (Urban 2001) role, facilitating the circulation of the words and ideas of White racism. Indeed, such panics precipitate what we might call “hyper-repetition” of slurs and stereotypes. Linguistic ideologies make this circulation natural and commonsensical. The case of truly appalling racist language used by the radio talk-show host Don Imus on his morning show April 5, 2007, is exemplary. Imus referred to the young African American players on the Rutgers University women’s basketball team, which had played the night before in the NCAA tournament’s final game, as “nappy-headed hos.”<sup>2</sup> Imus’s remark and the aftermath (he was forced to resign from the show) made headlines every day for weeks. On August 5, 2007, four months later, his epithet still returned 265,000 Google hits.

These episodes of panic probably occur because when utterances of racist words and propositions by public figures, especially by highly placed White men, become public, this is profoundly unsettling for many White Americans. They have invested, at the very least, attention to these figures in their role as celebrities. And many have invested far more: admiration,

envy, votes, financial contributions, hero-worship, and the like. George Allen, whose political career probably ended after he called an opponent a "macaca," was not only a United States senator. He was widely admired by White men because of his association with the all-American sport of football. He had himself played varsity football in college at the University of Virginia, and his father, also named George Allen, had been a legendary professional coach of major teams including the Chicago Bears, the Los Angeles Rams, and the Washington Redskins. Since "racism," in the folk theory the practice of rednecks and Ku Kluxers, is held to be incompatible with the exemplary character and courage that many fans associate with football, and certainly incompatible as well with service in one of America's highest elected offices, evidence that Senator Allen used racist slurs was profoundly unsettling to the self-image of his admirers. And it was unsettling to anybody who believed that White Americans are people who believe in racial equality, and who would be able to detect and reject racists as unqualified for public office. Those who had invested enough in Allen to feel attacks on him as a racist as an attack on their own creditable selves and on White virtue more broadly rose to his defense to preserve that credit and virtue.

#### Personalist discourse in moral panics

This chapter centers on the two-week media firestorm that followed a remark in support of legal racial segregation made on December 6, 2002, by Trent Lott, the senior US senator from Mississippi. This remark cost Lott what is arguably one of the most powerful political positions in the world, the majority leadership of the United States Senate. However, elite media opinion was almost unanimous in concluding that Lott was not a racist. Reportage and opinion essays consistently called his utterance a "gaffe" or a "slip." Before looking in detail at this case, let's look at a few other panics of this type, to get a general sense of the kinds of discourse that surround them.

My first example is the only one where the public figure involved was a woman. Not surprisingly, this was a woman connected with sports: Marge Schott, once owner of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team. Mrs. Schott's *New York Times* obituary, published March 3, 2004, exemplifies the focus on beliefs and intentions that accompanies the labeling of utterances as "gaffes." In the early 1990s Mrs. Schott had been ordered by the commissioner of baseball to give up her direct involvement in her team after a whole series of embarrassing public incidents in which she uttered anti-Semitic and racist slurs. Richard Goldstein, the *New York Times* obituary writer, used the term "gaffe" to describe these incidents:

- (1) "But a series of gaffes and intolerant remarks caused Mrs. Schott to lose control of the Reds in 1999 . . . Mrs. Schott's image first soured in November 1992 when several former Reds executives said that she had referred to players and business associates using racial and ethnic slurs . . . Mrs. Schott denied she was a racist, but acknowledged she had sometimes used a racial epithet" (Goldstein 2004).

Goldstein is at pains to find extenuating information, quoting the Mayor of Cincinnati as saying: "While there is no excusing some of the indelicate things she said, there was a kindness to Marge that made her a woman of the people." The former commissioner of baseball was quoted as saying: "I think she tried very hard to do the right things for baseball, but she had some enormous limitations and she had some difficulty overcoming them." The obituary characterizes Mrs. Schott as a big-hearted but eccentric person who said racist things.

Another famous "gaffe" again involves a sports celebrity, the golfer Fuzzy Zoeller, who made disparaging racist remarks about the golfer Tiger Woods, whose mother is Thai and whose father is African American. On April 20, 1997, Woods, only 21 years old and the most exciting new star in golf, was playing the final holes of the US Masters golf tournament, and it was clear that he would win. Zoeller, the 1979 champion, had just finished his own final round, and volunteered the following statement to reporters as he left the course:

- (2) "Little boy's driving well and he's putting well. He's doing everything it takes to win. So, you know what you guys do when he gets here? You pat him on the back and say congratulations and enjoy it and tell him not to serve fried chicken next year [it is the responsibility of the Masters winner to host a dinner for past winners in the following year]. Got it?" Zoeller snapped his fingers and began to walk away, but turned back briefly and said, "Or collard greens or whatever the hell it is they serve" (Fuzzy 1997; on the videotape on the CNN website, "they" in the final sentence is de-stressed).

Zoeller's statement was repeated again and again in all media for days, accompanied by extensive analysis of what he might have intended by calling Woods a "boy," by his stereotyping cracks about fried chicken and collard greens, and, of course, the de-stressed, utterly distancing "they" in the last sentence. Zoeller lost his K-Mart sponsorship, withdrew from a tournament in Greensboro, North Carolina, when the local African American community threatened to picket the affair, and was forced to make many public apologies.

Although Zoeller paid a high price for his remarks, most writers labeled them as a "gaffe" or "slip," an inappropriate attempt at a joke, the racist

content of which was not consistent with what was thought to be his character. For instance, John Feinstein (1999) in a bestselling golf book wrote of Zoeller:

- (3) "He is a gregarious, funny man who loves to tell jokes . . . But with a national TV camera rolling, Zoeller picked the wrong time and the wrong place to try to be funny . . . Many of his friends have pointed to his exemplary record over a period of many years in race relations and said it is unfair to wipe all that out because of a thirty-second slipup" (Feinstein 1999:26).

Note that Feinstein attends closely to motives: Zoeller "loves to tell jokes," he was "trying to be funny." Feinstein continued with a classic note on speaker intention: "What no one has ever been able to explain is what Zoeller was thinking at the moment that he made the comments" (Feinstein 1999:27). Woods himself was quoted as having taken intention into account when determining (after four days) to accept Zoeller's apology:

- (4) "... having played golf with Fuzzy, I know he is a jokester; and I have concluded that no personal animosity toward me was intended" (Accept 1997).

Not only did many commentators defend Zoeller, they attacked Woods for being slow to accept Zoeller's apology, and for making inappropriate remarks in his own right. Frank Luksa of the *Dallas Morning News* commented:

- (5) "Based on their respective backgrounds for bad taste, Woods and Zoeller deserved to play together" (Luksa 1997).

Luksa equates Zoeller's remark with off-color jokes about African Americans made by Woods himself and reported in the men's magazine *GQ* (Pierce 1997).

The Zoeller case, where a racist and stereotyping utterance was framed as a joke, brings out a fundamental tension in White American linguistic ideologies. The excuse that a racist remark was a joke is always available for Whites, and those who reject this excuse are likely to be accused of lacking a sense of humor. Yet this idea that the facial meanings of words are somehow suspended in joking, so that the joking intention of the speaker supersedes that meaning, conflicts with the baptismal ideology of meaning, which holds that meaning inheres in words themselves. If speakers choose particular words, they must believe in them and intend these meanings. If the baptismal theory that we saw speakers drawing on in Chapter 3 were

consistently employed, then racism would always lie in the words themselves, and the intention to joke would not make the words acceptable. So we can see that personalist ideology here is licensing the joking (and thus, within this ideological system, forgivable) use of racist language.

Both the idea that speaker intention is primary and the idea that words have inherent meanings leave out a third possibility: that if language is found to be racist by its targets, then it is racist language. A watered-down version of this is the prescription of "civility": that talk "should not give offence to actual and potential addressees" (Cameron 1995:134). However, flagrant violations of civility often accompany the defense of racist language. We saw in Chapter 3 examples of people who argued that it was simply ignorant and stupid for anyone to find racist content in the word "squaw." Those who objected to the slur were labeled as over-sensitive, thin-skinned. Personalist ideology insists that speaker intention, not the feelings of the hearer, is always most important in evaluating meaning. Thus both personalist and baptismal ideologies validate and make commonsensical a nearly total inattention on the part of Whites to the sensitivities of people of color. This is repeatedly attested in materials I have examined. Feagin (2006:27, citing a proposal by Hernán Vera) has called this curious absence of empathy "social alexithymia." Indeed, "social alexithymia" is more than inattention; in my research data, there are many, many examples of outright and explicit rejection of the authenticity of the feelings of people of color who object to racist language.

A good example of this kind of rejection is illustrated in the "Dame Edna" affair from February of 2003. This case shows how tension develops around racist jokes between baptismal ideologies of inherent meaning, personalist ideologies of speaker intention, and the right of the butts of racist language to object to it as wounding. "Dame Edna Everage" is one of the stage personae of the Australian comedian Barry Humphries, a spectacularly politically incorrect lady of a certain age, costumed in rhinestone-studded eyeglasses, a huge bouffant pouf of purple hair, and absurd frilly tea gowns. "Dame Edna" contributed a parodic advice column to the February 2003 issue of *Vanity Fair*, a glossy US monthly magazine that combines investigative journalism with celebrity news. This issue was purchased by many Latinos and Latinas because of its cover picture and feature article on Mexican actress Salma Hayek. In thumbing through the issue looking for the article on Hayek, these readers bumped into Dame Edna's advice column, which included the following exchange with an imaginary correspondent:

- (6) "Dear Dame Edna, I would very much like to learn a foreign language, preferably French or Italian, but every time I mention this, people tell me to learn Spanish instead. They say, 'Everyone is going to be speaking

Spanish in 10 years. George W. Bush speaks Spanish." Could this be true?  
Are we all going to have to speak Spanish?

Torn Romantic, Palm Beach

Dear Torn, Forget Spanish. There's nothing in that language worth reading except *Don Quixote*, and a quick listen to the CD of *Man of La Mancha* will take care of that. There was a poet named Garcia Lorca, but I'd leave him on the intellectual back burner if I were you. As for everyone's speaking it, what twaddle! Who speaks it that you are really desperate to talk to? The help? Your leaf blower? Study French or German, where there are at least a few books worth reading, or, if you're American, try English" (Ask Dame Edna 2003).

Dame Edna's remarks were widely noted; the *New York Times* reported them under the headline "Gaffes on Hispanics, from 2 well-known mouths" (Carr 2003).<sup>3</sup> They were big news on the Internet and in newspapers in cities like Miami, San Antonio, and Los Angeles. Major Latino organizations including the League of United Latin American Citizens and the National Council of La Raza called for an apology by *Vanity Fair* magazine and its publisher, Condé Nast.

Many respondents focused not on Dame Edna's intentionality as a parodist (some commentators, not being familiar with the character, missed this entirely), but on the fact that her words were untrue. This focus emanates from referentialist ideology, which permits stereotypes about people of color to be condemned as racist because they are not true. Dame Edna's parodic column could thus be called racist because it was factually wrong and "ignorant." A catalytic letter to *Vanity Fair* that was widely discussed and copied was posted to a website by Wendy Maldonado, who described herself as

- (7) "a 31-year-old Mexican-American woman, with three Ivy League degrees, working in New York City at a major firm. I sure as hell am NOT the leaf blower or the help. . . . Dame Edna could have chosen any number of amusing responses, however, she responded using cheap, two-dimensional stereotypes of Latinos and Latin Americans, revealing not only her racism, but also her profound ignorance of who we are. We are not just 'the help' and 'the leaf blowers.' We are architects and activists, journalists and doctors, governors and athletes, scientists and business people. We are Nobel Prize winners and Rhodes Scholars . . . If Dame Edna were even remotely cultured or educated, she would have read and lost herself in the exquisite writings of Nobel Prize winners Octavio Paz, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Pablo Neruda. She would know that Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz was one of the first feminists and poets of the Americas. She would admire Isabel Allende and Sandra Cisneros for their passionate prose and vibrant spirits" (Maldonado 2003).

The staff at *Latina* magazine addressed Dame Edna's ignorance by packing up a box of books by Spanish-speaking authors for Dame Edna, the editors of *Vanity Fair*, and the "hardworking researchers in your [*Vanity Fair*'s] fact-checking department"; the package included Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, and Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths* (listed on *Latina.com*; *Vanity Fair* 2003).

While Maldonado (in 7), the editors at *Latina.com*, and many other respondents took the view that Dame Edna's language was racist on its face because it was a stereotyping misrepresentation, other discussants argued that since the column was meant as a joke it should not count as racist. *Vanity Fair* published an apology that advanced this position:

- (8) "*Vanity Fair* regrets that certain remarks in our February issue by the entertainer and author Barry Humphries, in the guise of his fictional character Dame Edna, have caused offense to our readers and others. In the role of Dame Edna, Humphries practices a long comedic tradition of making statements that are tasteless, wrongheaded, or taboo with an eye toward exposing hypocrisies or prejudices. Anyone who has seen Dame Edna's over-the-top performances on TV or in the theater knows that she is an equal-opportunity distributor of insults, and her patently absurd comments about Spanish literature and Spanish speakers were offered in the spirit of outrageous comedy and were never intended to be taken to heart" (*Vanity Fair* Apology 2003).

Many Latinos and Latinas rejected this argument, observing that they understood that the piece was an attempt at humor, but that it was in poor taste and unfunny. Juan Gonzalez, the President of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, and Rafael Olmeda, Chair of the Issues Committee of this organization, wrote the following to *Vanity Fair*:

- (9) "Humor and satire are not safe hiding places for ignorance and bigotry. Frankly, we're tired of people hiding behind 'it was just a joke' after taking broad and unwarranted swipes at our culture and heritage" (Gonzalez and Olmeda 2003).

Of course those who objected to the column were accused of lacking a sense of humor. Even some Latinos made this argument. For instance, op-ed writer Helen Urbinas argued that:

- (10) "'La Dama's' column was not 'thinly veiled bigotry' but an obvious, albeit failed, attempt at humor . . . So, when can we laugh at ourselves? . . . Take a joke without being seen as a sell-out, a traitor?" (Urbinas 2003).

An anonymous contributor to HispanicOnline.com wrote that if Hispanics truly embraced their diversity, including the leaf blowers and the help,

- (11) "Maybe then we would not be so sensitive about some cartoon making fun of us" (Readers' Response 2003).

### **The Case of Senator Trent Lott: Personalist Discourse in the Media in a National Moral Panic**

The cases sketched above show that much is at stake in determining whether a racist utterance by a public figure is labeled as a slur, a gaffe, or a joke. The example I detail here involved exceptionally high stakes, because of the extraordinary prominence of the speaker, Senator Trent Lott, Republican of Mississippi, majority leader of the US Senate. This episode of moral panic engaged the most influential and prominent political writers in the national media, and so gives us a good look at how their linguistic ideologies shape discourse about racism among White elites.

The majority leadership of the Senate, which Lott had held from 1998 to 2002, is the most important office in the legislative branch of the US government and one of the most influential political positions in the world. Lott had long been associated with the most conservative wing of the Republican Party. At a 100th birthday party held in Washington, DC, on December 5, 2002, for Strom Thurmond, Republican of South Carolina, the oldest and longest-serving member of the United States Senate and notorious for his many years of advocacy of racial segregation, Lott was one of the most prominent of the national figures who came to the podium to offer birthday good wishes. His remarks included the following 45 words:

- (12) "I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either."

Lott referred to Thurmond's bid for the US presidency in 1948 as the candidate of the States' Rights Democrats, the so-called "Dixiecrat" party. The Dixiecrats broke from the national Democratic Party, walking out of its 1948 national convention when the Democrats adopted a platform plank endorsing civil rights legislation. The Dixiecrat platform stated, "We stand for the segregation of the races and the racial integrity of each race," and the party's slogan was "Segregation Forever." Thurmond carried Louisiana,

Alabama, his own home state of South Carolina, and Lott's home state of Mississippi, gaining over a million popular votes and 39 electoral votes in the largest showing by a third party in a US presidential election in the last 100 years.

Although Lott's remarks were delivered in the presence of many journalists and were televised by C-SPAN, major media coverage of the party included no mention of Lott's astonishing statement. On the Internet, though, liberal blogger Joshua Micah Marshall immediately noted the racist content of Lott's remarks in the December 6 entry in his weblog *Talking Points Memo* (Marshall 2002a). Marshall continued to push the issue throughout the next two weeks. On the conservative side of the web, blogger Andrew Sullivan also immediately labeled Lott's statement as racist.

The first mainstream media figure to note Lott's speech was an African American, Gwen Ifill, moderator for the Friday-evening PBS television program, *Washington Week in Review*. At the end of her half-hour program on Friday, December 6, Ifill played the C-SPAN clip of Lott delivering his statement and, with a quizzical expression on her face, invited her audience to "Let me know what you think of that."

On Saturday, December 7, well inside the first section on page A6, the *Washington Post* ran a negative comment on Lott's statement (Edsall 2002a). On Sunday, December 8, Lott's remarks were the topic on two major national television political discussion programs, CNN's *Crossfire* and NBC's *Meet the Press*. On Monday, December 9, Andrew Sullivan labeled Lott a "bigot" and a "racist" and called for his resignation. On Tuesday, December 10, 2002, *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman advanced the themes that became central to the debate. "Was Mr. Lott . . . ignorant of the aims of the 1948 Thurmond campaign? Or was he just, in the excitement of the moment, blurting out his real views?" (Krugman 2002a). From this point a classic media firestorm built until Lott resigned as Senate Majority Leader on Friday, December 20, 2002. Lott retained his senatorial seat and was not censured. When the Senate allocated leadership positions at the beginning of the 2003 session, Lott was given a prestigious and influential position as chairman of the Rules Committee. In January 2005 he was awarded a significant honorary post as chairman of the inauguration ceremonies for George W. Bush's second presidential term.

Moral panics like the one that followed Lott's remark are significant moments in cultural production and reproduction. I adapt the label "moral panic" (Cohen 1972) for such episodes, not to downplay the importance of the issues, but because I think the label "panic" captures the frenetic energy of such discourse events. Moral panics play out at multiple sites. No ethnographer can listen in on every tavern conversation, workplace joke exchange, Internet chat room, or boardroom backstage where these social dramas develop. However, a moral panic can be tracked through

journalistic discourse, when reporters and commentators in all media, from provincial talk radio to the editorial page of the *New York Times*, from web loggers to the news readers on the national television networks, join in developing reportage and commentary. Over a very short period of time, these events generate an immense quantity of discourse on a single narrow subject. Such a discourse event produces multiple refractions of the same rhetorical formulas, permitting the recovery of what is stable and what is variable in a particular rhetorical system at a very fine level of delicacy.

The Trent Lott firestorm produced over slightly more than two weeks many thousands of words of reportage and commentary. In order to contain the volume of material, I consulted only a few major media sources. From the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* I collected every mention of the Lott crisis between December 7 and December 21, 2002. On many days, each of these newspapers ran up to half-a-dozen pieces of reportage, feature sidebars, editorials, and op-ed pieces on the controversy. The *New York Times*, for which I used the print version of the national edition, for a week and a half devoted to the controversy an entire two-page spread inside the front section, under the title "Divisive Words." In addition, front-page coverage, editorials, and op-ed essays appeared daily in the *Times* throughout the two weeks. During the week of December 15 to December 21, in order to determine whether elite media on the West Coast were handling the story the same way as the big eastern newspapers, I searched the website of the *Los Angeles Times*, the major western US daily newspaper. *Los Angeles Times* coverage was indistinguishable from that in the two eastern papers.

The Trent Lott episode was an early example of the influence of a new media force, the web loggers or "bloggers," independent commentators who publish on websites, often several times a day. I used the archives of two influential web loggers, the conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan, then at [www.andrewsullivan.com](http://www.andrewsullivan.com), and liberal blogger Joshua Micah Marshall at [www.talkingpointsmemo.com](http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com). Print and broadcast media during the Lott panic frequently quoted both of them.

While restricting the sample of journalistic discourse to only three newspapers neglects some diversity, Jamieson and Campbell (1992:18-19) argue that newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are more than merely representative of journalistic rhetoric and opinion. They are taken as standards by other media for what is newsworthy and for what range of opinion about the news is appropriate. Thus, while my material comes from only three newspapers, writers for these papers shape the national discourse, and their journalism reveals core values and ideologies that make sense to a sizable sector of the US population. Especially, these writers are the voice of the elites that are crucial in the reproduction of White racism in the United States in its current phase.

News reportage, opinion pieces, and editorials in newspapers, while they often have “authors,” should not be taken to represent the views of these writers in any simple way. These texts are produced through a complex journalistic process, during which multiple writers and editors select from a range of preliminary texts and utterances from documents and from people who are judged to be appropriate “sources.” They are shaped in a small social sphere, the newsrooms of the three major US newspapers. Importantly, the language of journalistic texts is governed by in-house style sheets that are closely guarded. However, it is known that these guidelines include policies against language thought to be inflammatory. For instance, word leaked to the press in 2004 that the *New York Times* style editors had decided that the word “genocide” could finally be used about the Turkish massacre of Armenians in 1901–02 (Bass 2004). The *Times*’ public editor recently addressed the use of the word “liar,” arguing that it “is a loaded word that presumes you know someone’s intent” (note the invocation of personalist linguistic ideology), that would be problematic even in an editorial and “should never be used in a news story, except when quoting someone” (Hoyt 2007). Thus there is every reason to believe that words like “racist” and “racism,” widely understood as offensive to their targets and threatening to the White elites who constitute the social world of the mainstream media, will appear, if they appear at all, only in quotes from sources. Finally, journalists depend heavily on the good will of senators and their staffs and are therefore cautious about giving insult. In summary, we cannot know what individual journalists or sources might have said about Trent Lott had they been recorded chatting privately with their friends or family. What we can see is the journalism that these newspapers produced, which is intended, in the final analysis, not merely to inform and to influence, but also to present a corporate image that will advance their interests as profit-seeking businesses.

Trent Lott’s words invited the question: Was the Majority Leader of the United States Senate in 2002 a racist and a segregationist? This question was profoundly threatening to White elites in the United States, who tell themselves a story of racial progress. As a student leader in the early 1960s, Lott had opposed the integration of the University of Mississippi. Senator Thurmond had been one of the most notorious White supremacists and segregationists in the US government through the 1970s. In the narrative of racial progress, such people are said to have changed, to have become colorblind or even anti-racist. Much is made of their good works for impoverished minority communities, their contributions to college scholarships for African Americans, the people of color on their staffs both national and local. Thus, a great deal was at stake.

Within the folk theory of racism, to answer the terrible question, “Is Senator Lott a racist?”, in the affirmative would require proof that he

believed that people of color were biologically inferior to Whites. Thus media discourse during the Lott firestorm was about beliefs and motives. Superficially, this discourse satisfied the well-known journalistic ethic of balanced coverage, quoting sources with different points of view, and publishing columnists from right, left, and center. However, it was astonishingly homogeneous in its consistent attention to beliefs and motives rather than to the effects and impacts of speech. All sides drew on the presupposition that words reflect speaker beliefs and that meaning is the product of speaker intention. These personalist presuppositions permitted journalists to develop elaborate hypotheses about Lott's inner nature, his thoughts, beliefs, and motives.

#### The folk psychology of personalism: Head and heart

Media discourse in the Lott firestorm made explicit the folk psychology that underlies the presuppositions of personalist and referentialist linguistic ideology. The folk psychological concepts of "head" and "heart" emerge in three propositions: (1) the meanings of a person's words are determined by intentions that reside in a stable core of belief and thought, the heart; (2) the meanings of a person's words are inherent in the words themselves and speakers can be assumed to choose words that reflect their beliefs; (3) certain circumstances interrupt this connection between belief and meaning and can produce talk that reflects only an unstable and error-prone animating psychological locus, the head. These include careless inattention to speech, but also "light talk" and joking.

The contradictions and loopholes provided by this folk psychology and by the linguistic-ideological terms of the debate around Lott's words permitted the extraordinary threat to the story of White American progress raised by his remarks to be explained away, and made it almost impossible for the media to label him as a racist. Lott was accused of a multitude of sins, but the word "racist" was attached to him directly only three times in the 150 pieces of journalism that I assembled: once by Andrew Sullivan on his web log of December 9, 2002, and twice by African American sources quoted by journalists. The word "racism" appears only 14 times.

As with many other terms in the language of the debate, the folk-psychological contrast between "head" and "heart" was introduced by Lott himself. In an apology for his remarks telephoned to Sean Hannity's show on the Fox television network on December 11, 2002, Lott said that he had made "a mistake of the head, not of the heart."<sup>4</sup> This language was repeated again and again. In (13a), the *Washington Post* columnist Philip Kennicott uses the language to attack Lott. In (13b) an African American source is quoted using it to support him.

- (13) a. "... On Sean Hannity's radio show, he made a classic distinction between thought and feeling: 'This was a mistake of the head, not of the heart,' he said. . . . In a society that has abolished most forms of legal discrimination, that has made the N word more offensive than the F word or the S word, racism persists because people become adept at *not* saying what they really think when it will get them in trouble. In this sense, Lott's statement that this was a mistake of the head, not of the heart, sounds rather ominous: He seems to say that he didn't betray his heart at all – that he is at heart the same politician he was more than 20 years ago when he made very much the same remark about the Dixiecrats" (Kennicott 2002).
- b. "I can't say, honestly, that no long-term damage has been done, which is unfortunate because I think this was a mistake of the head, not of the heart" (Hockstader and Dewar, 2002, quoting J. C. Watts, African American Republican Congressman from Oklahoma).

The term "heart" as a metaphor for the site of intention appeared very frequently, as seen in the following examples.

- (14) a. "One should be very hesitant about ascribing bigotry. It is hard to discern what someone feels in his heart of hearts" (Krauthammer 2002).
- b. "'It is not like it is just a few things,' said David Bositis, senior political analyst at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. 'What was most damaging about what he said is that Trent Lott came across as saying what was in his heart'" (Hulse 2002).
- c. "Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky . . . credited Mr. Lott with expressing 'heartfelt regret'" (Nagourney and Hulse 2002).

Alongside the "heart," where "heartfelt" beliefs reside, folk psychology also provides a second intentional locus, the "head." The head is a site of superficial views, associated with the moment-to-moment conduct of communication instead of deep and lasting beliefs. The "head" is invoked in proposals that the meaning of words has been disengaged from deep and consistent belief. Lott himself contributed not only the expression "a mistake of the head," but an elaboration in which he tried to capture the exact circumstances of such disengagement. He excused himself by claiming that he had been "winging it," speaking without careful preparation. This language was repeated again and again, as seen in (15).

- (15) a. "I take full responsibility for my remarks. I can't say it was prepared remarks. As a matter of fact, I was winging it" (Excerpts from News Conference Held by Senator Lott in Mississippi 2002).
- b. "It was almost endearingly ingenuous of Trent Lott, the serial apolo-gizer, to say in major apology No. 4 – the tone-deaf news conference-

cum-soliloquy in Pascagoula, Miss. – that his remarks at Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party should be excused because he was ‘winging it.’ Meaning he was talking without a script when he said how sad it was that Thurmond lost to Harry Truman in the 1948 presidential election, thereby leading to the ‘troubles,’ aka the civil rights revolution. It is dangerous for Republicans to have a leader who not only cannot be trusted without a script but who is utterly unembarrassed about citing scriptlessness as an exculpation for any embarrassment he causes” (Will 2002).

Attempts to disengage the facial meaning of Lott’s words from his beliefs employed a rich lexicon of expressions for superficial error, including “winging it,” “mistake,” “gaffe,” “mis-speak,” and the like. Another one of Lott’s own characterizations, a “poor choice of words” (a nice expression of the intersection of personalist ideology noted in “choice” and of referentialist ideology presupposed in “poor . . . words”), was also taken up both by his defenders and by his opponents.

- (16) a. “‘A poor choice of words conveyed to some that I had embraced the discarded policies of the past,’ Mr. Lott said in a statement” (Kurtz 2002a).
- b. “Some [members of the Black Caucus of the US House of Representatives] warned that Democrats would anger blacks if they dismissed Lott’s remarks as a poor choice of words” (Edsall 2002b; quoting *USA Today*).
- c. “And while few Republicans defended what Lott said, many questioned whether quitting his leadership position was too steep a price to pay for poorly chosen words for which he has since apologized” (Morin 2002).

The word “mistake” was used repeatedly by both Lott and others:

- (17) a. Lott speaking: “I accept the fact that I made a terrible mistake, used horrible words, caused hurt” (BET Interview with Sen. Trent Lott 2002).
- b. “Sen. James M. Jeffords . . . said he believes Lott made a mistake and said something in a manner that doesn’t reflect his true feelings” (Hockstader and Dewar 2002).

In summary, the folk psychology underlying media discourse about Lott’s utterance holds that language that comes from the “heart” is the authentic voice of a person’s intentional core, but when we hear the “head” we hear only superficial and fleeting expressions that can include “mis-speaking,” “blundering,” “mistakes,” and “poorly chosen words.”

Personalist linguistic ideology requires that to determine the true meaning of words, we must somehow have access to a speaker's "heart." An important contradiction emerged from this requirement, between referentialist linguistic ideology – that beliefs are revealed by the "plain meaning" of the words, which give a direct route to the heart – and personalist linguistic ideology with its focus on intention, which suggests that more evidence is required than simply "plain meaning" to assess a speaker's inner states. We have seen that many people assume that words derive an inherent meaning from some baptismal event that occurred in the distant past. Further, we have seen that these words are supposed to match a speaker's beliefs, which should be true. Another important component of referentialist ideology is the "conduit metaphor" (Reddy 1979). This is the idea that words carry information from the speaker to the hearer in an unproblematic way, without interruption, just like water passes through a conduit and emerges from the spout as the same water that entered at the source. The following examples show these elements of referentialist ideology.

- (18) a. "That's what the guy believes. You can tell that from listening to his words" (Marshall 2002c).  
b. "It was not a 'poor choice of words,' as he later pleaded. It was a perfectly clear choice of words articulating a perfectly clear idea" (Krauthammer 2002).  
c. "Everyone deserves a break for a 'poor choice of words' but it wasn't the words that really offended. It was the plain meaning of the words. What other words would have sufficed?" (Kurtz 2002b, quoting Andrew Sullivan).

While the journalists quoted in (18) drew on referentialist ideologies to insist that Lott's words had a "plain meaning" that revealed his beliefs, others held that to accuse Lott of being a segregationist or a racist, more evidence than the plain meaning of his words was required. Some of these debaters appealed to Lott's "record" of beliefs and actions. The basic idea was that if Lott was found to have consistently made remarks like the ones at Senator Thurmond's birthday party, then those words might indeed reflect his beliefs. This idea involves an important linguistic ideological category, "word," seen in expressions like "to keep one's word" and "to be a man of his word." "Word" is the continuity of reference from utterance to utterance, and from utterance to deeds. Unchanging "word" is an important index of "character," the nature of a person's moral center (Hill 2000). From a racist character, we expect consistently racist words. For this reason, the discovery that Lott had used language almost identical to that of his birthday-party remark in December 2002 20 years earlier, when he introduced Senator Thurmond at a rally for Ronald Reagan in 1980,

became an important weapon for Lott's opponents. However, a record of action, as well as speech, was also brought to bear on the question of Lott's character. Both supporters and opponents often explicitly invoked versions of the slogan "actions speak louder than words." Thus Lott's voting record and other dimensions of his public career were carefully examined. Evidence against him included his membership in groups devoted to uncritical celebration of the southern Confederate heritage and speeches before such groups, and his votes against honors for victims of White terrorism during the years of the Civil Rights movement. Evidence in his favor included his success in getting resources to African American communities in Mississippi and his record of hiring African American staff. Examples of appeals to "the record" are seen in (19):

- (19) a. "After a fiery speech by Mr. Thurmond at a campaign rally in Mississippi for Ronald Reagan in Nov. 1980, Mr. Lott, then a congressman, told a crowd in Jackson, 'You know, if we had elected this man 30 years ago, we wouldn't be in the mess we are in today.' Last week, in remarks he later characterized as spontaneous and a poor choice of words, Mr. Lott repeated his opinion about Mr. Thurmond . . . The fact that Mr. Lott uttered similar comments in 1980 threatened to intensify the controversy" (Hulse 2002).
- b. "This isn't the first piece of evidence that Lott is an unreconstructed racist. He has spoken before gussied-up white supremacist groups before" (Kurtz 2002a, quoting Andrew Sullivan).
- c. "I have looked at Trent Lott's record, and I don't see that vitriolic thing toward the blacks" (Rutenberg and Barringer 2002, quoting Bill O'Reilly, Fox Channel Talk Show host).
- d. "'We have examined Senator Lott's record, and we are deeply disappointed to find that this is not an isolated incident but a longstanding pattern of behavior that can no longer be ignored.' Mr. Lott's office sought to defuse such criticism by distributing papers showing his support for black colleges, trade with Africa, and a resolution condemning a string of arson attacks on black churches" (Nagourney and Hulse 2002, quoting "Two leaders of the all-Democrat Congressional Black Caucus").

The power of the record as evidence of a stable core of belief and intention residing in the heart put Lott into a double bind. As his apologies grew more elaborate, he was attacked by both sides for not sticking to his principles. When he said in an interview on Black Entertainment Television that he supported affirmative action, a position in diametric opposition to two decades of Republican Party platforms, he was attacked by both sides for having no stable beliefs. The apparent shift in Lott's views was said to call into question whether Lott had a "heart" at all, or whether this folk-psychological zone, the site of consistency and character, was simply empty.

As seen in (20b and c), both Lott and his words shared this quality of being “hollow,” an interesting iconic link between word and person.

- (20) a. “It’s hard to think of anyone more hollow than Lott . . . Trent Lott is now the archetypal Washington figure. He runs for office just to stay in office. He is now bailing frantically, throwing belief and principle overboard, just to stay where he is. He is the majority leader of the US Senate. That is who he is. That is the totality of his beliefs . . . What do you want him to say? He’ll say it. I have turned from loathing Lott and what he stands for to pitying him for standing for nothing” (Cohen 2002c).
- b. “Mr. Lott made matters only worse by embarking on a last-ditch campaign full of abject apologies that rang hollow to most witnesses” (Mr. Lott Steps Down 2002 [editorial]).
- c. “All the evidence indicates that what Lott truly meant to say was nothing – nothing at all . . . Critics and alarmists have taken Lott’s empty and meaningless words at a public event and injected them with substance they never had” (Rogers 2002).

#### Light talk, public and private: What light talk reveals about speaker beliefs

A second line of evidence used to explore the link between Lott’s words and his beliefs and intentions was the context for his remark. In the review of joking and parody above, we have seen that personalist ideology includes the possibility that some contexts permit disengagement between belief and the plain meaning of words. Journalism about Lott’s remark consistently contrasted private “light talk” with public “serious talk.” Public talk is thought to require a certain level of “seriousness,” while private talk can be “light,” of no relevance in the formation of opinion.

Light talk among intimates provides an opportunity for White Americans to indulge in explicit “race talk” (Eliasoph 1999; Myers 2005; Picca and Feagin 2007), including epithets and stereotypes. To the degree that a particular stretch of talk is keyed as “light,” it is relatively opaque to criticism and censure as racist. This opacity derives from cultural models that associate style, person, and space in simplistic default configurations. Light talk and joking are prototypically private, associated with the spaces of intimacy, where interpersonal solidarity is more important than strict adherence to truth. Indeed, the assumption of a key of “lightness” actually constitutes intimacy, so to reject the content of such talk is to reject the intimacy itself, and thus to threaten important social ties (Eliasoph 1999). Light talk and joking are prototypically vernacular, so they are associated with private persons. While, as we saw in Chapter 3, evidence of “bias”

is grounds for dismissing the views of a public speaker, bias and interest in private space are unproblematic. "In private," among intimates, a speaker need not claim neutrality or innocence, but may express her strongest and most authentic opinions. Thus to censure offensive talk in the light style/private space/intimate relationship context is to attack, not interest, but character or judgment, a dangerous threat against the speaker (Hill 2001:92). This kind of intimate talk can, in fact, be used "in public." But such a usage constitutes a metaphorical code switch (Blom and Gumperz 1972) that layers a frame of privacy and intimacy into the interstices of a larger public context. This frame insulates the speaker from many kinds of challenges that might be made of public, serious talk.

This contrast between "public" and "private" appeared frequently in the discourse of the Lott debate. Many commentators argued that his remarks were prototypical "light talk" – in Lott's own words, "flattery to an old man on his birthday" – and that it was absurd to take them seriously or to seek in them some deeper meaning. Thurmond's birthday party was said to be a "trivial" event, not a moment in which serious policy talk was being uttered. In a sense, then, Lott's words were "private," in spite of the fact that this particular birthday party was televised live on C-SPAN and attended by the President of the United States. Lott's supporters argued that "light talk" can interrupt the connection between word and intention, so that people need not be "held responsible" for things said on "lighthearted" occasions. Lott himself asserted this point, as seen in the two quotations below:

- (21) a. "It was a lighthearted affair . . . I was too much into the moment. . . . I was trying to make happy an incredible legendary human being . . . I was just into the event . . . Really, it was just an effort to help, to encourage an elderly gentleman to feel good on that occasion of his 100th birthday. So there were no venal thoughts in my mind" (Excerpts from News Conference Held by Senator Lott in Mississippi 2002).
- b. "This was a lighthearted celebration of the 100th birthday of legendary Senator Strom Thurmond. My comments were not an endorsement of his positions of over 50 years ago, but of the man and his life" (Edsall 2002b).

After his remarks at the birthday party began to attract attention, Lott's office staff argued that the context of his utterance was more important than the apparent meaning of his words:

- (22) "Spokesman Ron Bonjean issued a two-sentence statement: 'Senator Lott's remarks were intended to pay tribute to a remarkable man who led a remarkable life. To read anything more into these comments is wrong'" (Edsall 2002a).

Journalists who had initially failed to report Lott's remarks excused themselves by appealing to the context. Note the use of the first name "Strom" in the quote from *Washington Post* reporter Mark Leibovich in (23), which, if it is accurate, suggests that he felt that he had attended the birthday party as a friend of the ancient senator, rather than as a journalist.

- (23) "Baltimore Sun reporter Julie Hirschfeld Davis says there was so much 'tongue-in-cheek' talk at Thurmond's birthday party that a lot of us probably tuned out remarks that we might have been more careful listening to if it hadn't been such a jubilant atmosphere. Most people were writing this as a featury 100th-birthday bash. 'I wanted to use it but it seemed too parenthetical, given that the story was about Strom,' says Washington Post reporter Mark Leibovich. 'I feel badly about it in retrospect. I kick myself'" (Kurtz 2002c).

Lott's remarks were categorized as "light" by using trivializing verbs – "blurted," "burbled," "brayed" – to describe them. Such labels were insulting, but given the linguistic-ideological complex in which they were embedded, their result was to give Lott a free pass on the racist meaning of his words. And Lott's supporters explicitly used the idea of "light" speech to dismiss the significance of his remarks.

- (24) a. "I think it was a mistake. I don't think he was at all serious, and I don't even think we should dwell on it . . . I mean, this is the kind of thing that makes people infuriated with the media, is they pick up something that's said at a birthday party and turn it into a case of whether he should be impeached" (Kurtz 2002a, quoting Robert Novak).  
 b. "Some [Whites in Mississippi] seemed to resent Democrats, blacks and liberals for making a fuss over what many whites here regard as a trivial event – praising the 100-year-old Thurmond (R-S.C.) at his birthday" (Hockstader 2002).

The categorization of Lott's words as "light talk" did permit a contrary interpretation, derived from a folk psychology influenced – as noted by the commentator in (25c) – by the Freudian analysis of jokes and slips of the tongue. This interpretation holds that it is precisely in "slips" and "gaffes," moments of being "out of control," that the inner core of meaning, meaning "in the heart," "true belief," is most likely to be revealed. From this perspective, Lott's "cheerleader ebullience" was a quality that was likely to trip him up, and being "into the moment" loosened his tongue.

- (25) a. "Today, undone by the same sort of ebullience he once showed as a cheerleader at Ole Miss but unfortunately displayed again at a 100th-birthday party for Senator Strom Thurmond 15 days ago, he quit" (Clymer 2002).

b. "Or was he just, in the excitement of the moment, blurting out his real views?" (Krugman 2002a).

c. "It was a heady moment, he was overcome, there was a birthday cake and punch and he 'went too far' [quoting an apology by Lott]. The question, however, is what it means to go too far. Lott's efforts to explain and excuse the remarks implicitly acknowledge the thing that makes public gaffes so disturbing: the belief (see Freud) that we tell more of the truth when our tongue slips than when we say exactly what we intend to say" (Kennicott 2002).

In summary, some commentators thought that the "lighthearted" context excused Lott's remarks, and others held that the context had loosened Lott's tongue and revealed him as a racist. While these are very different positions, they agree in being personalist, in insisting on the central importance of intention, emanating from some inner site of motivation, as a shaper of meaning.

Yet another invocation of the public-private dichotomy occasionally appeared. Several texts, like Joshua Micah Marshall's cited in (26), suggested that "public figures" like Lott should be held to higher standards of responsibility.

- (26) "Trent Lott may not believe in civil rights for blacks. It's a disaster for the country if he doesn't. But if he doesn't, it's still important – given who he is – that he *say* he does, that he genuflect publicly to the idea. It's important for him to say something like this if for no other reason than to underscore the fact that anyone who doesn't support racial equality – even in this most general sense – is politically beyond the pale" (Marshall, 2002b).

### Does Personalist Linguistic Ideology Insulate Speakers from Accusations of Racism?

The discourse published during the Trent Lott firestorm reveals that elite journalists, regardless of whether they are part of the "mainstream media" or the "blogosphere," all adhere to the premises of referentialism, baptismal ideology, and the conduit metaphor: Meaning inheres in the "plain meaning" of words. But this position about plain meaning is complicated by personalism, by the folk psychology that holds that talk can emanate from either of two possible sites of intentionality: the "heart," the site of true feelings and continuity of authentic belief, and the "head," where mistakes and poor choices of words are produced. Talk can be further divided into light, private talk and serious, public talk. Light talk and private

talk are, on the one hand, thought to release speakers from the constraints of truth and sincerity in order to permit flattery and the joys of intimacy that Lott called “getting carried away.” On the other hand, some commentators endorsed folk Freudianism: light talk, since it is not carefully considered, may be especially revealing, providing a context where discreditable beliefs can slip out.

This intention-saturated personalist ideology of language made it difficult for commentators to make an accusation of racism, even in a case as plain as the shocking remarks by Senator Lott. In the folk theory, racism is a form of belief. Beliefs reside in the stable core of the self, in the “heart” of folk psychology, and it is broadly agreed that it is hard to know what is in another person’s heart. Furthermore, if words are so tightly linked to their intentional sources, in criticizing words the critic is criticizing a person, indeed, the moral core of that person. Such a criticism threatens not only Lott, but all those who have voted for him, praised him, excused him, kow-towed to him, and permitted him to occupy one of the nation’s highest offices for many years, and who will share Lott’s stigma if he is found to be a racist. Thus to advance such a criticism requires the strongest kind of evidence for his intentions. This, in addition to the policy of avoiding inflammatory language apparently specified in the style guides of newspapers like the *New York Times*, may be the reason for the astonishing fact that these thousands of words of text, quoting many people, contained only three instances where Lott was directly labeled a “racist.” In every other case the word “racist” was only indirectly linked to Lott in expressions like “I doubt that Senator Lott is a racist.”

Personalist ideology helps speakers avoid the label “racist” or “bigot” by providing a rich and diverse lexicon for motives. Instead of being accused of being a “racist,” Lott was accused of “blindness,” “tone-deafness,” “cluelessness,” “insensitivity,” “not getting it,” “stupidity.” While these were taken seriously, they were consistently distinguished from “racism.” In order to give a sense of how strongly Lott’s attackers preferred these labels, I give in (27) a large number of examples, including passages from many of the best-known op-ed writers and reporters in the national press, as well as quotes from ordinary citizens that reporters chose to use to illustrate popular reactions to Lott’s remarks.

- (27) a. “Was he also ignorant of the aims of the 1948 Thurmond campaign? . . . Mr. Lott declared himself ignorant of the group’s aims” (Krugman 2002a).
- b. “The majority leader of the senate may not be a racist, but he is remarkably incapable of appreciating what it was like to walk in those shoes” [referring to an anecdote about an African American man who wasn’t allowed to try shoes on] (Cohen 2002a).

c. "This is about getting wrong the most important political phenomenon in the past half-century of American history: the civil rights movement. Getting wrong its importance is not an issue of political correctness. It is evidence of a historical blindness that is utterly disqualifying for national office. . . . What is so appalling about Lott's remarks is not the bigotry but the blindness. One should be very hesitant about ascribing bigotry. It is hard to discern what someone feels in his heart of hearts. It is less hard to discern what someone sees, particularly if he tells you. Lott sees the civil rights movement and 'all these problems over all these years.' He missed the whole story" (Krauthammer 2002).

d. "This doesn't mean the senator from Mississippi harbors secret segregationist desires. But it does suggest that he doesn't quite get the self-inflicted damage here" (Kurtz 2002b).

e. "The trouble with Lott is that he combines the worst part of some Democrats . . . with the worst part of some Republicans – racial obtuseness in this case, to the brink of outright bigotry" (Kurtz 2002b, quoting Andrew Sullivan).

f. "The birthday party controversy is only the latest evidence that Mr. Lott . . . has never figured any of this out, or come to grips with the bad old days in his state" (Fire Trent Lott 2002 [editorial]).

g. "When you read that Lott said the same thing about Thurmond in 1980, it's like he's thinking that what worked well in Mississippi in 1980 will work for a national audience. It's like he's got a complete blind spot" (Applebome 2002, quoting Merle Black, Emory University professor).

h. "Obviously, I had a blind spot" (Excerpts from News Conference Held by Senator Lott in Mississippi 2002).

i. "the clueless majority leader himself" (Rich 2002).

j. "Senator Chuck Hagel, a Nebraska Republican, called Mr. Lott's remarks a 'dumb statement' . . . 'It raises questions about his judgment'" (Nagourney and Hulse 2002).

k. "Trent Lott doesn't deserve the death penalty for what he said . . . It was foolish to the extreme, but it's an occupational hazard we have" (Bumiller and Hulse 2002, quoting Senator Arlen Specter, R-Pennsylvania).

l. "Lott apologized for saying something stupid and putting people in a box like this" (Milbank and VandeHei 2002).

m. "How can Trent count the votes in the Senate if he can't count the C-Span cameras in a room? The man's dumber than concrete" (Dowd 2002).

n. "What he said was stupid, and it was racist" (Hockstader 2002, quoting an unnamed African American man, Pascagoula, Mississippi. This is one of the three direct uses of "racist" in the data).

Some commentators chose to condemn Lott for misplaced "nostalgia," as evidenced by his admiration of Confederate President Jefferson Davis

(who spent much of his life in Mississippi), his enthusiasm for the Confederate battle flag, and the like. They distinguished “nostalgia” from “racism,” as can be seen in (28):

- (28) a. “And it’s clear from the man’s long history of hobnobbing with neo-conservative wing-nuts and general nostalgia for the pre-civil-rights era South. . . . You don’t have to believe that the guy’s an out and out racist, but it’s very hard not to conclude that he sees the old Jim Crow days as the good ol’ days” (Marshall 2002c).
- b. “But if it’s impossible to believe that Lott is a racist . . . Lott is intellectually stunted by a pernicious and – if the Senate had any sense – politically lethal case of Margaret Mitchell Syndrome” [Margaret Mitchell is the author of *Gone With the Wind*, a novel that celebrates the pre-Civil War South] (Cohen 2002a).
- c. “‘He waxes nostalgic from time to time without meaning anything racist,’ Wiseman said of Lott” (Edsall and Fears 2002, quoting Marty Wiseman, Director of Mississippi State University’s Stennis Institute).

Even where commentators recognized that such “nostalgia” is racist, they resisted an explicit label. The lines in (30a) are a very good example of using the word “racist” without directly labeling Lott:

- (30) a. “Right now we’re debating whether the Republican Senate majority leader is a racist who yearns for the days of segregation or just a good ole boy who says a lot of things that make it *seem* like he’s a racist who yearns for the days of segregation” (Krugman 2002b, quoting Josh Marshall).
- b. “He cannot apologize for being who he is, for seeing in the cratered face of the ancient Thurmond the vaunted Lost Cause instead of a racist, which is the same thing. He heard ‘Dixie.’ He should have heard Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’” (Cohen 2002b).

#### Performative ideology: Did Lott’s words wound?

The linguistic ideology of performativity played a very small role in the Lott debate. While Lott himself had apologized for “wounding . . . hurting many Americans who feel so deeply in this area,” this received almost no uptake. Journalism in the elite newspapers in my sample gave very little attention to the intensely hurtful impact that Lott’s words must have had on African Americans. Thus the elite media discourse around Lott’s remark is a good example of Feagin’s (2006) “social alexithymia,” inattention to the feelings of people of color. Not surprisingly, it was mainly African American journalists and sources who reported deeply visceral reactions to

Lott's statement. A rare piece of reportage that sought out Black Republicans reported them using language like "slapped in the face," "like a rifle going off," or "jolted." One source said that the experience of hearing Lott's language "was like being cut with a chainsaw" (Clemetson 2002). Civil rights veteran John Lewis told *Washington Post* reporter Thomas Edsall that he had been "stunned" on hearing of the remarks (Edsall 2002a). Donna Britt, an African American columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote a thoughtful account of her own pain:

- (31) "Despite the 'shock' certain black folks profess to feel when racism arises, the fact is we are seldom deeply surprised. Yes, we feel the jolt – that initial, head-jerking, 'huh?' that hits every human being when what we see as divine order slides out of whack . . . our reaction is . . . utter disbelief. Then, black folks get over it. Because we expect racism. Most of us are ready, waiting and, on some level, prepared for its appearance – which doesn't make it hurt less" (Britt 2002).

White hearers of Lott's remarks wanted to believe that they, too, had been viscerally shocked. Thomas B. Edsall (2002a) of the *Washington Post* reported that Lott's remark at Thurmond's birthday party had been greeted by "an audible gasp and general silence." I have listened to the C-SPAN broadcast, and I heard no such reaction from the almost entirely White audience. Another *Washington Post* reporter, Amy Argetsinger (2002), reported the reaction to Lott's remark to have been a "stony silence" that caused Lott to "lose his groove." Again, I did not hear this silence, or see any break in Lott's performance.

Most of the attention within the general framework of the ideology of performativity preferred to avoid any mention of who might have been hurt by Lott's remarks. They were very frequently called "insensitive" or "divisive," without specifying who might have been divided from whom, or whose sensitivities had been assaulted. The *New York Times* special feature coverage ran for two weeks under the heading "DIVISIVE WORDS."

- (32) a. "racially divisive comments at a birthday celebration" (Allen and VandeHei 2002).  
 b. "These findings underscore the divisiveness of Lott's remarks" (Morin 2002).  
 c. "After making what were construed as racially divisive remarks" (Hulse with Bumiller 2002).

Lott himself repeatedly called his language "insensitive" without saying exactly how this was the case, and this term was taken up by others:

- (33) a. "You can, you know, say it was innocent, but it was insensitive at the very least and repugnant, frankly" (BET Interview with Sen. Trent Lott 2002, quoting Trent Lott).
- b. "the [Republican] party has shown its clear resolve to have zero-tolerance for insensitivity to these racial issues" (Purdum 2002, quoting Florida Republican Party Chairman Al Cardenas).

### **Conclusion: The Function of the Label "Gaffe" in White Racism**

The Trent Lott firestorm illustrates the usefulness of the "gaffe" label for the project of White racism. Once the label is applied, the intricate personalist discourse of motives illustrated here takes over as a form of common sense, and makes serious critical discussion of White racism extremely difficult. Since racism is located "in the heart," it is difficult to detect. Furthermore, this location makes racism exclusively a property of individual persons, their beliefs and their motives. A vague "insensitivity" or "divisiveness" is distinguished from "racism." These texts make clear that Whites can be stupid, insensitive, clueless, divisive, hurtful, and nostalgic for Jim Crow and a society based on African American slave labor, and still not be "racist." This situation is slowly changing. However, the discourse we can observe in the Trent Lott panic shows one reason change is so slow. Everyday commonsense understandings of the relationship between language, persons, and actions make it very easy to avoid seeing racists even when they have been transparently exposed.

Ironically, at the very same time that the excesses of personalist discourse documented here deny the continuity, forms, and functions of White racism, they vividly reinscribe and reinforce its terms. The ideas of segregation, of the stigma of color, of the forms and contours of race were repeated again and again in the debate over Lott's words, in a discourse of great detail and intensity that occupied every level of the US media and, if my own experience is any guide, many private conversations, for weeks.

As I finish this chapter, the great Trent Lott firestorm is five years behind us. And it appears to have been almost completely forgotten. The revelation that a public figure as highly placed as Lott was patently a racist and a segregationist did not fit into the White American narrative of racial progress. It lay outside what Foucault called the "regime of truth." During the weeks of moral panic, many commentators suggested that Lott's words provided a golden opportunity for Democratic politicians to attack the Republican Party with one of the most insulting labels that White Americans have for one another: racist. But leaders of the Democratic Party have

not exploited his words. Lott himself remains a powerful figure in Washington. Even today, with a Democratic legislative majority, Lott is often quoted as a significant source by journalists on a wide range of issues. The *New York Times* continues to use the most oblique possible language about Lott; in a recent article reporter Carl Hulse recalled the remark as “what some saw as a racially charged comment” (Hulse 2007). There are many reasons why Lott’s “gaffe” has been buried. But, I would argue, linguistic ideologies shaped the rhetorical trajectories that made this interment possible. Even well-meaning people who were horrified by Lott’s remarks wrote within the broad framework of personalist/referentialist linguistic ideologies, locating Trent Lott as a respectable person who had merely “slipped.”

The Lott firestorm also worked metaculturally to reinscribe personalist discourse as normal and natural. Indeed, the metacultural functions, the reinscription of personalism and the reproduction of crucial ideas about race and racism, may be vital functions of these moral panics. They surely have made little impact on beliefs or behavior. Their structure and language are highly ritualized and repetitive, and do not seem to evolve from one incident to the next. The discourse around Fuzzy Zoeller’s racist insult against Tiger Woods in 1997, the discourse around Trent Lott’s endorsement of segregation in 2002, that around George Allen’s use of racist epithets in August 2006, around Michael Richard’s cry of “Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!” in November 2006, and around Don Imus’s repulsive racist and sexist epithets in the Spring of 2007 are all very similar. And they have passed by, headlines and all, without making any impact on the nearly universal belief among White Americans that their racism is a part of history, irrelevant to our present. After all, these are “gaffes,” “slips,” “mistakes.” Personalist discourse provides no critical purchase on where they might be coming from.

It might be useful to think of incidents of racism as providing an opportunity to defend personalism, rather than thinking of personalism as an ideological framework within which to evade charges of racism. Personalism may be linked in its own right to some of the most important interests of our era. Anthropologist Webb Keane (2002), who was able to observe changes in linguistic ideologies during the late phases of the monetization of a traditional economy on the island of Sumba in Indonesia, has pointed out that personalism is profoundly connected to contemporary economic orders. Our understandings of human beings as individuals defined by “freedoms” within which the motives on which personalism is centered develop, are closely linked to our understanding of the openness of the entire world to being valued in monetary terms, where prices are set in a negotiation among individual desires and rationalities. The idea that items can be assigned prices is closely related to the idea that words can be

assigned meanings (in fact, baptismal ideology, which credits such assignments to some authority, works in both contexts). And of course the right and capacity of individuals to transact in markets are among the central “freedoms” that we recognize. That is, personalism is part of a broader “representational economy.” Yet personalism, as Keane (2002) has suggested, is in constant crisis. This crisis occurs not merely because the personalist requirement that words, belief, and reality should match is routinely flouted at every level of private and public life. The crisis emanates as well from the fundamental nature of linguistic signs as conventional and public. I mentioned in Chapter 3 the work of Butler (1997), who followed Derrida (1988) in observing that speech is by its very nature repeatable for any purpose, and thus is intrinsically detachable from any autonomous, individual site of belief or commitment. Bakhtin (1981) convincingly argues that no level of private commitment permits speakers to fully purge their words of the traces of history and the voices of others. Personalism and referentialism require defense from such heresies, which might undermine the representational economy in which meanings and markets are connected.

The ongoing crisis of personalism requires that those who live most fully within the representational economy which it anchors – which includes such dimensions of contemporary thought as the possibility of rational choice, the possibility of authentic belief, and the possibility of valid assertions about the value of money (Keane 2002, 2007)<sup>5</sup> – must find occasions to defend and reinscribe it. The persons who benefit most from this system have been, for several hundred years, White elites. Accusations of racism against sports heroes or major politicians provide occasions for them to reassert the forms of common sense that are most valuable to them. These public figures exemplify the personalist ideal, seeming to possess agency and freedom of the highest and most complete type. Thus, any challenge to their control of the truth, or to the validity of their beliefs, or to the sincerity of their intentions, invites the probing of all of these major dimensions of personalism. The constant core of the inner self, the coherent propositional, affective, and intentional states of that self, and the degree to which meanings emanating from these match the world, can become natural once again as they are backgrounded as “mere” presuppositions in debates over charges of racism and the categorization of racist utterances as “gaffes.” These debates show clearly the complex intertwining of White racism with other large-scale structures of White culture and history.