

# The Linguistics of Color Blind Racism: How to Talk Nasty about Blacks without Sounding “Racist”

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that color blind racism, the central racial ideology of the post-civil rights era, has a peculiar style characterized by slipperiness, apparent nonracialism, and ambivalence. This style fits quite well the normative climate of the country as well as the central frames of color blind racism. I document in the paper five stylistic components of this ideology, namely, (1) whites’ avoidance of direct racial language, (2) the central rhetorical strategies or “semantic moves” used by whites to safely express their racial views, (3) the role of projection, (4) the role of diminutives, and (5) how incursions into forbidden issues produce almost total incoherence among many whites. I conclude the paper with a discussion on how this style enhances the ideological menace of color blind racism.

“I am a little bit for affirmative action, but...” “Yes and no, I mean...” “I am not prejudiced, but...” “Some of my best friends are black” “I sort of agree and disagree” All these phrases have become standard linguistic fare of whites’ contemporary racetalk. But what do these phrases mean? For some analysts, they are expressions of whites’ racial ambivalence (Hass et al. 1992; Katz and Haas 1988). For others, they are expressions of progress

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and resistance in racial matters (Schuman et al. 1997). Yet for a smaller group of analysts,<sup>1</sup> they represent whites' careful consideration of all sides on racial matters (Lipset 1996; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Sniderman and Piazza 1993).

In contrast to these mainstream explanations, I contend that these phrases, as well as the ideas expressed after these phrases are interjected, are part of the style<sup>2</sup> of color blind racism, the dominant racial ideology of the post-civil rights era. This ideology emerged as part of the great racial transformation that occurred in the late sixties and early seventies in the United States. As the Jim Crow overt style of maintaining white supremacy was replaced with "now you see it, now you don't" practices that were subtle, apparently non-racial, and institutionalized, an ideology fitting to this era emerged (Brooks 1990, 1996; Smith 1995; Bonilla-Silva and Lewis 1999). In contrast with Jim Crow, color blind racism major themes are (1) the extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters in an abstract manner, (2) cultural rather than biological explanation of minorities' inferior standing and performance in labor and educational markets, (3) naturalization of racial phenomena such as residential and school segregation, and (4) the claim that discrimination has all but disappeared (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; c.f., Jackman (1994), Essed (1996), and Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith (1997)).

At the core of my analysis is the idea that because the normative climate of what can be said in public changed dramatically from the Jim Crow to the post-civil rights era, the language of color blindness is slippery, apparently contradictory, and often subtle. Thus analysts must excavate the rhetorical maze of confusing, apparently ambivalent answers to straight questions, of answers speckled with disclaimers such as "I don't know, but..." or "Yes and no," of answers almost unintelligible because of their higher than usual level of incoherence ("I mean, I mean, I don't know, I mean yes, but I don't know"). This is not an easy task and analysts can mistake honest "I don't knows" for rhetorical moves to save face or nervousness for thematically-induced incoherence. Cognizant of this

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<sup>1</sup> See the new consensus among survey researchers on racial attitudes in David O. Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Lawrence Bobo, *Racialized Boundaries* (2000). See specially Michael Dawson's piece, "Slowly Coming to Grips with the Effects of the American Racial Order on American Policy Preferences," in the same volume.

<sup>2</sup> The style of an ideology refers to its peculiar *linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies* (or *racetalk*), to the technical tools that allow users to articulate its frames and storylines. For a full elaboration of the racial ideology paradigm, see Chapter 3 in Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

possibility, I offer as much data on each case I cite in an effort to clarify the muddy waters of color blindness.

The data for the analysis comes from interviews gathered as part of two projects: the 1997 Survey of College Students' Social Attitudes and the 1998 Detroit Area Study (DAS henceforth). The former study was conducted among 600 students (451 whites) taking social science courses in three Universities (Southern University or SU, Midwestern University or MU, and Western University or WU). The latter was conducted among 400 black and white respondents (323 whites and 67 blacks) in the Detroit metropolitan area. The interviews for the former were gathered from a random sample of the 90 percent (406) of the white students who included information on how to contact them while the latter were selected randomly among the 400 participants. Altogether there are 41 interviews with college students (10 percent sub-sample) and 83 with Detroit area residents (21 percent sub-sample).

Since a full discursive analysis of the stylistic components of color blindness is beyond the scope of this article, I focus instead on showcasing five things. First, I document how whites avoid direct racial language while expressing their racial views. Second, I analyze the central rhetorical strategies or "semantic moves"<sup>3</sup> used by whites. Third, I examine the role of projection. Fourth, I show the role of diminutives in color blind talk. Lastly, I examine how incursions into forbidden issues produce almost total incoherence among many whites.

### **Racism without Racial Epithets: Color Blindness and the Avoidance of Racial Terminology**

Today using words such as "Nigger" and "Spic" is seen as an immoral act. More significantly, saying things that sound or can be perceived as racist is disallowed. And because the dominant racial ideology portends to be color blind, there is little space for socially sanctioned speech about race-related matters. Does this mean that whites do not talk in public<sup>4</sup> about nonwhites? As many researchers have shown, they do but they do so but in a very careful, indirect, hesitant manner and, occasionally, even through code language (Edsall and Edsall 1992). Not surprisingly, very few white respondents in these studies used traditional Jim Crow terminology to refer to blacks. Only one college student and six DAS respondents used

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<sup>3</sup> For a full description of semantic moves, see Teun van Dijk, *Prejudice in Discourse* (Amsterdam, P.J. Benjamins Publishing Co., 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Many analysts have observed that private racetalk by whites about non-whites is more direct and clearly racist. For example, Lawrence Otis-Graham, in *Member of the Club* (1995) shows how when whites feel free to talk about race, they do and in the nastiest fashion.

terms such as “colored” or “Negroes” to refer to blacks and not a single one used the term “nigger” as a legitimate term. The student who used the term “colored” was Rachel, a MU student with very conservative racial views. However, it is not clear if she used the term as part of her normal repertoire or if it was a slip of her tongue. She used the term in her answer to a question about her college friends.

Um ... I wouldn't say mostly white. I'd say, it's probably a mix. Um, 'cause I have like a lot of Asian friends. I have a lot of, um ... colored friends, ya' know, but ... ya' know, it wasn't ... maybe not even the same, like, background either, I don't know. It's hard to tell, ya' know? From looking at somebody, so...<sup>5</sup>

All DAS respondents who used the term “colored” were 60 years of age or older. An example of these respondents is Lucy, a part-time commissary for a vending business in her sixties, who described the racial makeup of her place of work, as follows: “Oh, we used to have, um, about three colored girls that uh, had worked with us, but since then they have quit.” Pauline, a retired woman in her late seventies, described the racial makeup of the schools she attended while growing up, in the following way: “They were mixed, you know. [**Interviewer: Mixed of what?**] Well we had ah ... mostly ... um, colored and the white.”

Although none of these five older respondents were racial progressives, it would be a mistake to regard them as “Archie Bunkers” either just because they used the racial language of the past. In truth, all these respondents were whites who have not fully absorbed the racial language and style of the post-civil rights era. And based on what they said, some of these respondents seemed more open minded than many of the younger respondents. For instance, Pauline, a retired worker, when asked if she had black friends while growing up, said, “I always had black friends. Ah, even when I worked I had black friends. In fact, I had a couple of my best friends.” Notwithstanding that many whites' self-reports on friendship with blacks are suspect (Jackman, Jackman, and Crane 1986; Smith 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2001), based on her own narrative, Pauline seems to have had real associations with blacks. For example, she played with black kids while growing up and remembered fondly her black coworker. More significantly, Pauline has a niece who is dating a black “gentleman.” When asked, “How do you feel about this relationship?,” she answered:

I feel like it's none of my business. She's had trouble ... with ah, she's divorced. She's had a lot of trouble with her *Ex*, and he's very, very abusive. This fellow

<sup>5</sup> The following are the basic conventions I used in the transcriptions. Respondent's emphasis (*italics*), comments on respondent's demeanor – tone, etc. – or by the interviewer (**bold print**), and pauses ( ... )

she's going with is very kind. The kids like him so there you go. So maybe it's gonna be good for her and the kids. And for him too, who knows!

It is important to point out that the fact that young whites do not use racial slurs as legitimate terms in *public* discussions does not mean that they do not use these terms or derogate blacks in other forms in *private* discussions. For example, most college students acknowledged listening or telling racist jokes with friends and six even told the jokes in the interviews.<sup>6</sup> Below I provide two examples of these jokes.

Lynn, a MU student, told the following crude racist joke she heard back home.

Lynn: Okay [**laughing**] It was, it's terrible, but, um, what do you call . . . a car full of niggers driving off a cliff?  
Interviewer: What?  
Lynn: A good beginning.

Eric, another MU student, told the following joke:

It was, uh, what do you call a black man . . . a black man in a, in a coat and a tie? And it was, uh, the defendant or something. Yeah, it was the defendant. And that was, that was probably a couple of weeks ago or something that I heard that.

In addition, racist terminology is current in the life of students as illustrated by the fact that over half of them acknowledged having friends or close relatives who are "racist." For example, John, an older student at WU, revealed that his father used to use racist terminology to refer to blacks. When asked about his family's involvement in politics, John said the following:

Well, I'd say not real involvement, but uh . . . I did notice that my father referred to black people as . . . niggers. He'd also call them colored people. Uh . . . but uh, that was mainly just the environment that he grew up in and I don't think he really wanted to hurt anyone's feelings.

John also confessed that his father had influenced his views and that he struggled over this fact. His confession came in the middle of a discussion about how often he talks about racial issues now. After pointing out that "a cousin of mine . . . married a black" and that he attends "church regularly and I have friends that are interracially married," John stated the following:

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<sup>6</sup> A survey conducted by Zogby International at the request of Philip Klinkner, Director of Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College of randomly selected people ages 18 to 29 in 1999 found that 90 percent of the respondents had heard racist jokes occasionally. Grier Peter and James N. Thurman, "Youths' Shifting Attitudes on Race," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 18, 1999.

You got to admit it, you know, this is prejudiced country, I mean, uh ... I really got to bury a lot of uh ... stinkin' thinking uh, I was taught as I was growing up uh, I have to really look at things because sometimes unconsciously I may discriminate against somebody and I try not to. . .

Another example is Lee, another WU student. After describing the neighborhood where he grew up, he acknowledged that, "my father is pretty racist, so I got the, the, um, heard everything, just about every racial slur you could possibly think of I heard it from him, and I think that had an effect on me early." For example, while his family was watching black TV shows such as *Sanford and Son* or the *Jeffersons*, his father would say things such as "Are we gonna watch the nigger shows?" Lee and his brothers would say "Yeah" because it was "just kind of second nature." Although Lee believes that he has been able to successfully repel his father's racist influence as an adult, he admits that he had some Nazi leanings while growing up and that although "I wasn't a skin head or anything, but, you know, every now and again, I would draw a swastika on my notebook or something. . ."

### **Reading through the Rhetorical Maze of Color Blindness**

Because post-civil rights racial norms disallow the open expression of *direct* racial views and positions, whites have developed a concealed way of voicing them. In this section I examine the most common verbal strategies used by whites in post-civil rights' racetalk.

#### *A) "I am not prejudiced, but. . ." and "Some of my best friends are"*

Among the interviewees I found four college students and ten DAS respondents who used the phrase "I'm not prejudiced, but" in their answers. I cite one example from the students and two from the DAS sample to illustrate how respondents used this semantic move. Lee, a WU student, inserted a version of the move to soften his opposition to affirmative action. In a back-and-forth between Lee and the interviewer, the interviewer asked him point blank, "So, so, are you saying now that you would, you oppose it more so, or. . .?"

Yeah ... I would say. I don't know if that's racist or what, but I don't know. I don't really talk about that much with people, you know. So, I really haven't developed such a strong, a really strong opinion about it, but I guess I do oppose it now.

Rhonda, a part-time employee in a jewelry store in her sixties, used the move to safely express her highly racialized views on why she thinks blacks have a worse overall status than whites.

Well, I'm gonna be, I'm gonna be, you understand I'm, I'm (not) prejudice or racial or whatever. Ah, they've always given the ah, slut . . . smut jobs . . . because they would do it. Then they stopped, they stopped doing. Ah, welfare system got to be very, very easy. And I'm not saying all, there's many, many white people on welfare that shouldn't be. But if you take the percentage in the tri-city country area, you will find that the majority are white, but all you see is the black people on welfare, but it's a graduation up. . . Thirty years ago they started it and they continued it, and they continued it, and they continued it. And it was easier to collect we!, ah, ah, you now, welfare from the state rather than go out and get a job. Why work if, if they gonna, if the government's gonna take care of you?

Interestingly, Rhonda stated her very negative views about blacks although throughout the interview she had positioned herself as a “minority” (she is a Jewish woman who reported that she struggled against anti-Semitism all her life).

Rita, a woman in her early twenties working one day a week at a cookie shop, inserted an iteration of the phrase in her answer to the interracial marriage question.

Um . . . I think it's hard enough in the world to find love. When you find it, go for it. I mean, like I said, it doesn't matter about race because there's only one race, the human race. That shows I can't be prejudiced about that. I've got a mixed nephew.

Rita has a “mixed nephew,” which she believes “shows I can't be prejudiced,” but proceeded to state a number of highly racist things about blacks. For instance, she believed that blacks are naturally more “aggressive and high tempered” than whites, “exaggerate” the significance discrimination, and are worse off than whites because “a lot of times . . . they don't want to work hard to get something.”

The “Some of my best friends are. . .” phrase was used by eight students and twelve DAS respondents to signify that they could not possibly be “racist.” For example, Carol, a student at SU, described the racial makeup of her school as follows:

We of course had white and black, Hispanic, Oriental, um, one of my best friends was considered Pacific Islander so um, it was a very good mix, I mean, very . . . I didn't, there were no distinct um, lines between white people and the minorities, as far as the people I hung out with and the classes I was in.

Later on, when asked to specify the proportion minority in her class, Carol said,

Um, it was pretty good half and half. I mean, there were, there was a good half of my gifted friends in my class was minority. **Interviewer: OK. And**

**that's like what kind?]** Um, all. We had um, black, Spanish, um, my two best friends in high school were Oriental, well one was half Vietnamese and one was Japanese.

Carol went on to repeat two more times that these two Asians were her “best friends.” Elsewhere (Bonilla-Silva 2001) I examine in some detail the nature of these interracial friendships, I just point out for now the strategic nature of some of these claims. For instance, because Carol said four times that some of her best friends were “Oriental,” it was easier for her to state all sorts of anti-minority positions that included even her preference for white mates.

Jill, a salesperson in her thirties, used the “Some of my best friends are black” move in a rather odd way. Jill’s response to the question, “Have you ever dated racial minorities?,” was: “No, but I think one of my best friends is black.” The interviewer then asked Jill, “OK, can you talk a little bit about that relationship?,” and Jill answered as follows:

Yeah, we worked together at Automotive Company and what happened is this man was very bright. He graduated first in his class in economics from Indiana University and he got a fellowship through Automotive Company, which probably helped because he was black. And I also know he got into Harvard because he had terrible GMAT scores, but he did get in. He didn’t have terrible, he had in the high fives. He did get in and graduated from Harvard and now he’s an investment banker. But you know what? He is a nice guy. What he lacks in intellect he makes up for in ... he works so hard and he’s always trying to improve himself. He should be there because he works harder than anybody I know.

Jill’s “best friend,” according to her own narrative, was “very bright” but had “terrible GMAT scores” but “did get in [Harvard]” which he deserves because “He is a nice guy” who makes up “what he lacks in intellect” with hard work.

Sue, a homemaker in her early thirties, used a version of this phrase in her answer to a question about whether or not minorities are hard to approach or are not welcomed by whites in jobs, schools, and neighborhoods.

... There wasn’t a whole lot of opportunity for me to answer that question in this area because there wasn’t that much... But when I was at Wayne State, when I went to college, we were, it was an intermingling thing. I mean, there’s a, it’s a very high minority at Wayne State and so everybody got along great. One of my uh, one of my dearest friends was a black fella and uh, he went to California to pursue a music career and he married a white girl. And uh, they’re good friends.

Since Sue failed to answer the question, the interviewer asked the question again. This time, Sue used the phrase again in connection to her husband.



I didn't see that at Wayne State and, as far as around here goes, I honestly don't know. 'Cause it's never been something that's been an issue to me. No one has approached me along those lines. But I can't answer other than that. I've never had any problems with it. My husband, the, with him, one of his good friends at work is black and he's the only black guy that works for the company my husband works for. And that's my husband's favorite person [laughs]. "Cause they get along so well and they have, you know, they think alike, they talk alike, same thing."

B) *"I am not black, so I don't know"*

Since these two moves have become cliché (and hence less effective), whites have developed other moves to accomplish the same goal. One such move is stating that "I am not black, so I don't know." After this phrase is inserted, respondents usually proceed with statements betraying a strong stance on the matter in question. About one quarter of the white college students but few DAS respondents (3/66) used the phrase "I am not black, so I don't know." For example, Brian, a student at SU, inserted the statement in response to the direct question on discrimination.

Uh, I don't know. I believe them. I don't know, I'm not a black person living so I don't hang out with a lot of black people, so I don't see it happen. But I do watch TV and we were watching the stupid talk shows there's nothing else on and there's people out there. And uh, I don't know, just that and just hearing the news and stuff. I'm sure it's less than it used to be, at least that's what everybody keeps saying so... But, uh, I think it's less. But uh, I can't say. But I can't speak for like a black person who says they're being harassed or being uh, prejudice or uh, discriminated against.

Brian's carefully worded statement allows him to safely state his belief that discrimination "it's less than it used to be." Later on in the interview Brian stated that although discrimination happens in "corporations like Texaco," that he assumes "there's also corporations where it doesn't happen that way ... so, there's really both sides to the coin."

The second example is Liz, a student at MU. She also used the phrase in her answer to the direct question on discrimination.

Um, just because I'm not black, I'm not Hispanic, I don't really, don't understand. I don't go through it I guess. But then again, I've seen like racism on, you know, towards whites, scholarships and as far as school goes, which, I mean, which bothers me too. So I guess I can kind of understand.

In a specific question on whether or not blacks experience discrimination in jobs and promotions, Liz answered by avoiding the issue by making a statement of her belief in abstract liberalism.

Um, I just think that the best qualified should probably get the job and that ... you know, like I wouldn't see why someone black wouldn't get a job over someone white who was more qualified or better suited for the job.

Since Liz hinted that blacks lie when they make claims of discrimination, the interviewer asked her the following question: “Mhm. So when they say that that happens to them, do you think they’re ... lying, or ...?” Liz then proceeded to make a quick reversal to restore her image of neutrality.

I mean, I don’t think they’re lying, but I wouldn’t, I mean, I guess in my little world, that everything is perfect, I wouldn’t see why that would happen. But I guess that there are people who are, you know, racist who do, you know, would not promote someone black just because they’re black, which I don’t really understand, you know.

C) “*Yes and no, but...*”

A common way of stating racial views without opening yourself to the charge of racism is apparently taking all sides on an issue. The following two examples illustrate how college students used this stylistic tool. First is Mark, a MU student, expressed his view on affirmative action as follows:

Yes and no. This is probably the toughest thing I have deciding. I really ... ‘cause I’ve thought about this a lot, but... I can make a pro-con list and I still wouldn’t like. I’ve heard most of the issues on this subject and I honestly couldn’t give a definite answer.

Mark, who was taking a sociology course at the time of the interview, recognized that minorities “don’t have the same starting points and, if you are starting from so much lower, they should definitely be granted *some* additional opportunities to at least have an equal ... playing ground.” However, Mark added, “I’m gonna be going out for a job next year, and I’ll be honest, I’d be upset if I’m just as qualified as someone else, and individually, I’d be upset if a company takes, you know, like an African American over me just because he is an African American.” Mark repeated this point when discussing three affirmative action-based hiring scenarios. When asked if he would personally support the hypothetical company’s decisions, Mark said: “I, I? If I’m that person, I’m not gonna support it. If I’m that majority getting rejected just because I’m a different race.” Mark also used a similar argument to explain what he thinks happens in college admissions. Thus Mark’s support for affirmative action is theoretical rather than practical.

Emily, a student at SU, answer to a question on providing minorities special opportunities to be admitted into universities was,

... Unique opportunities ... um ... I don’t know? There might be, I guess, some minorities do get uh schools aren’t as well-funded as others. So, I would have to say yes and no. I think they should get an opportunity to come, but I also don’t thin they should allow other people to come. ‘Cause that’s sort of like a double-edged sword, maybe because you are discriminating against

one group any way, any way you do it uh, and I don't believe in that, and I don't think you should discriminate against one group to give another a better chance. And I don't believe that's fair at all. But I also don't believe that it's fair they have to (attend a) school that's not uh, can't teach as well or don't have the facilities to teach them like they should. Um, I don't know. I'm kinda wishy-washy on that.

In Emily's answer to the direct question on discrimination, her position on affirmative action became clearer.

... I just have a problem with the discrimination, you're gonna discriminate against a group, umm, and what happened in the past is horrible and it should never happen again, but I also think that to move forward you have to let go of the past and let go of what happened. Um, you know, and it should really start equaling out um, 'cause I feel that some of, some of it will go too far and it will swing the other way. Umm, one group is going to be discriminated against, I don't, I don't believe in that. I don't think one group should have an advantage over another, um, regardless of what happened in the past.

Thus, Emily opposes affirmative action as it is practiced because she believes it is reverse discrimination and hence favors programs that are not in place (expanding educational opportunities for minorities before college) or that would not change minorities' status at all (perfect equal opportunity without changing the group-level inequalities).

Although DAS respondents also used the "Yes and no" strategy, they did so less frequently than college students. The following example illustrates how they used this phrase. Sandra, a retail person in her forties, used this rhetorical strategy to voice her opposition to affirmative action in a manner that allowed her to save face. Sandra's answer to the question "Are you for or against affirmative action?" was as follows:

... Yes ... and no. I feel [**clears throat**]... someone should be able to ... have *something*, education, job, whatever ... ah ... because they've earned it, they deserve it, they have the ability to do it. You don't want to put a six year old as a *rocket scientist*. They don't have the ability. It doesn't matter if the kid's black or white. Ah ... as far as letting one have the job over another one just because of their race or their gender, I don't believe in that.

Sandra's "yes and no" answer on affirmative action is truly a strong "no" since she does not find any reason why affirmative action programs must be in place.

Other respondents did not use the phrase "Yes and no, but..." but inserted similar statements to safely express their reservations, objections, and, at times, opposition to a policy. For example, Lee, the WU student previously cited, answered the affirmative action question in the following manner:

... Um ... well, um ... well, I guess I'm for it. I would oppose it because I think that ... I think it's treating them as if they're different, you know. To treat someone as if they are different is ... kind of oppressive, I think ... but I, I support it in, in another way. But you know, a lot of minorities do need extra cash to get to college and stuff because it is, it is imbalanced.

After this convoluted answer, the interviewer searched for clarification and asked, "So, overall if you had to choose whether or not you support it, what would you say?" Lee's response was, "Why do I have to choose (Laughs)?"

As with college students, DAS respondents used other rhetorical buffers that amounted to the to the "Yes and no, but" semantic move. Lynn, a human resource manager in her early fifties, explained her view on interracial marriage as follows:

I have mixed emotions on it. I feel that two people can fall in love and it, you know, you can build a strong ... bond with one another, but also, you know, there are consequences to that unfortunately in this world, and so it would be a very difficult relationship. If my daughter or son were to date somebody of another ethnic background, black especially, I'd be uncomfortable. But not any more so than if they were dating, like I said, an Indian or a ah ... ah, Mexican or a non-Caucasian ... even an Italian.

Lynn went on to ponder aloud her own views on this matter in a very odd fashion:

I don't know why, I mean, it, 'cause I'm not ... in fact, I, I, you know, I think the black race is one of the most gentle races of all of them. I think that they are violent out of emotion not out of indecisiveness or evilness. They are not that spicy. But, I *don't know*.

#### D) *Anything but race*

Another rhetorical move typical of color blind racism is the "Anything but race" strategy.<sup>7</sup> This strategy involves interjecting comments such as "Is not a prejudiced thing" to dismiss the fact that race affects an aspect of the respondent's life. Hence, this tool allows whites to smooth out racial fractures in their otherwise color blind story. This strategy was used by over half of the students and DAS respondents. Sonny, a student at MU, used this tool to explain why she did not have minority friends while growing up. Sonny revealed in the interview that she had Italian friends but suggested that "race never came into play" and that "most of my friends were ...

<sup>7</sup> Melvin Thomas has found that this perspective affects deeply social science research on racial matters. Melvin Thomas, "Anything But Race: The Social Science Retreat from Racism," *African American Research Perspectives* Winter 79-96 (2000).  
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just normal kids.” After revealing that “one of my best friends is Indian (Asian Indian),” she pondered why she and her friends did not have blacks in their crowd.

... I mean, there was so many kids. I don't think we had any black friends. I don't know why. It kid of stuck together and ... I don't know, it wasn't that we, it wasn't that we wouldn't be *like* ... *allowing* to black people. It's just that ... there was never, like, an opportunity. There's no ... population like that around where we lived.

Rick, a Mormon student at WU who opposed affirmative action, argued that blacks read “too much” when they do not get jobs. Rick's answered the question, “How would you counter those who believe that this company (a company described as 97% white in the process of making a hiring decision between a black and a white applicant) has a serious diversity company?,”

Um ... I would probably say to them um ... I'd say, “Do you know for sure? Do you know the manager, the person that hires them? Do you know them to be racist? Do you know that they are that way?” Um ... I'd probably say, “If I knew the guy, I'd say he just got hired based on how well his score is. Or maybe is just whites in that neighborhood or mostly whites or not as many blacks percentage wise. And ... I would claim that I think that they are looking too much into the situation ... reading too much ... reading too much racism into the situation ... while there probably isn't any at all.

Rick, as most of the students who were asked to explain why the company was 97% white, could not concede that discrimination had anything to do with this situation. Thus, Rick's position and way of stating it clearly amount to “anything but race.”

As with college students, many DAS respondents used the “Anything but race” rhetorical strategy. For instance, Marge, an unemployed woman in her early fifties, used this rhetorical strategy in response to the interracial marriage question.

... Very different than what I used to think I think it doesn't have anything to do with racism. It has to do with, um, how you will all be treated. Now, if it's just a matter of um, uh, of you and the other person and there's no families involved, no kids involved and if you are living in an area (where people have) open minds, I think it's fine. But when you start dragging kids in, no matter how much you love ... or whether you are a racist or not, that's not the question, it's how those kids are going to be treated. And so, uh, my answer is, um, uh, if there are kids, you know, families in, uh, and all that involved, and you're living in a racially, you know, racist kind of area, no, I don't believe in, uh, you know, marrying somebody of a different race ... But if it's you two together and there's nobody else involved, then I say it's fine. But, you know, when you are dragging other people in, you have to think of them too.

Obviously, the phrase “I think it doesn’t have anything to do with racism” and the very carefully and long-winded statement afterwards allowed Marge to oppose almost all kinds of interracial unions.

Finally Don, a machinist in his late thirties, used this strategy in his answer to a question dealing with residential segregation. His answer to the question, “America has a lot of all-white and all-black neighborhoods. What do you think about this situation?,” was the following:

I wouldn’t write any kind of theme on it because it really doesn’t matter to me um, if there’s blacks or whites there. ‘Cause not really the color or the people that’s going to make me like an area. Well, to be honest with you, the reason I’m in this area is because of the price I got in this house. And I needed a place so I bought this, but when I buy my next house it doesn’t matter if the people are um, the kind of people that I would like or get along with. Um, I would move in that area whether it was all-white, all-black or whatever. So it really doesn’t matter to me.

Social scientists have documented the variety of ways in which racial factors affect Americans’ housing decisions (Massey and Denton 1993; Yinger 1995). For example, when whites were asked in the DAS, “If you could find the housing that you would want and like, would you rather live in a neighborhood that is all white, mostly white, half and half, or mostly black?” 53.1% percent selected the “all white” and “mostly white” alternatives (62.2% percent of blacks selected the “half and half” choice). And based on the fact that Don had very negative views about blacks, his profession of color blindness on housing matters seems suspect. For example, Don believes that blacks are naturally (more athletic than whites) and culturally different from whites and that reverse discrimination is rampant. Don also opposes interracial marriage because “the kids suffer more than the people that are in the, two adults in the relationship.”

### **“They are the Racist Ones...”: Projection as a Rhetorical Tool**

Projection is part of our normal equipment to defend our selves. It is also an essential tool in the creation of a corporate identity (Us versus Them) (Bartra 1994). More pertinent to this section, paranoid projection helps us “escape from guilt and responsibility and affix blame elsewhere” (Keen 1986: 21). College students projected racial motivations onto blacks as a way of avoiding responsibility and feeling good about themselves. Their projections appeared on a variety of issues (e.g., affirmative action, school and residential segregation, interracial friendship and marriage, and blacks’ work ethic), but most often on the hot issue of so-called black self-segregation. For example, Janet, a student at SU, answered a question on whether or not blacks self-segregate as follows:

I think they segregate themselves. Or, I mean, I don't know how everybody else is, but I would have no problem with talking with or being friends with a black person or any other type of minority. I think they've just got into their heads that they are different and, as a result, they're pulling themselves away.

The interviewer followed-up Janet's answer with a question trying to ascertain if Janet had tried to mingle with blacks, but Janet cut her off quickly with the following statement: "They're off to their own kind of little own world."

Janet projected once more in her answer to the interracial marriage question onto people who marry across the color line.

I would feel that in most situations they're not really thinking of the, the child. I mean, they might not really think anything of it, *but* in reality I think most of the time when the child is growing up, he's going to be picked on because he has parents from different races and it's gonna ultimately affect the child and, and the end result is they're only thinking of them, of their own happiness, not the happiness of, of the kid.

By projecting selfishness onto people who intermarry, Janet was able to voice safely her otherwise racially problematic stance on intermarriage. Nevertheless, she admitted that if she or a member of her family ever became involved with someone from a different race, her family, "would *not* like it *at all!* [laughs].

Kim, another SU student, projected segregationist attitudes onto blacks.

Um, mainly I think they segregate themselves. I think that, you know, they have um, you know, I guess they probably feel they don't fit in, but I don't know if they really try. I don't know, you know, like they have their own Unions and I don't know how hard they try to fit into, you know, like ours, and we can't really fit into theirs 'cause we are not really allowed. I mean, I don't think all of them, like a lot of them are. I have several, you know, people that are in my classes that are minorities and they're just fine. I mean, for me, it's not like they don't want to talk to me 'cause I'm white or anything [laughs], they just, I don't know. . .

Although all projections are exculpatory (Memmi 2000), most accomplish this task implicitly. However, Kim not only projects racial motivations onto blacks but *openly* exonerates whites (and herself) for not mingling with blacks.

DAS respondents, as college students, projected racial motivations onto blacks, but at a slightly higher rate. Twenty two of the 66 white respondents projected racism or racial motivations onto blacks on a variety of issues. For example Ann, an unemployed woman in her twenties, answered the question on whether blacks are hard to approach or are not welcomed by whites as follows:

I think that, I don't know? They live too much on the past, if you ask me. Some of 'em do. You know, I think blacks are more prejudiced against whites than whites are against blacks.

Francine, a homemaker in her late twenties, answered a question on why blacks and whites see the police and the criminal court system very differently in the following way:

... Um, black people are just prejudiced. They just think that they're out to get them or something.

Pat, an orderly in a psychiatric hospital in her early thirties, balked at the idea of the government establishing programs on blacks' behalf to deal with the effects of discrimination.

On behalf of blacks? Ah, no, I think it's equaling out, ah, I mean, if if you want to go to school, you can. Ah, I don't think there should be ? Years back (the government) came out with a Negro College Fund [**clears throat**]. We don't have any United Caucasian Fund, I mean, I don't know why they separate themselves because they are allowed to go to the same schools and colleges and everything as white people. It should be all together. I don't think there should be ... *specials*, you know what I am saying? [**giggles and snorts**] No, I, ah, don't ? It should all be the same for everybody. Everybody wants equal rights, equal this and equal this and that will equal everything out. . .

Beverly, a small business owner and homemaker woman in her forties, projected the idea that blacks who are hired through affirmative action feel terrible. She stated that he believes that affirmative action is "unfair to black and white." The interviewer asked her to explain what she meant and Beverly then stated the following:

Because a lot of companies they know that they're hired (because they are black). I mean, it's got to be in their mind, it would be in (their) mind, that's why I'm saying this. "Was I hired because I was good or because I was black?"

The last example of projection is Scott, a drafter for a mechanical engineering company in his early twenties. In response to the question on whether blacks are hard to approach or are not welcomed by whites, Scott said that it depends on how they were raised because "I have approached a couple (of) black people and they'll just have their ghetto attitude that um, the white people own everything so then you have to prove yourself yada, yada, yada." Scott added immediately that the same thing can happen to white people. Therefore, the interviewers asked him, "So, in general, do you think that blacks, it just depends on the background or that there's nothing to go about, about blacks on the whole?," Scott answer was the following:



No. I mean, I would say that maybe they have a tendency to uh, be a little more prejudice than the average uh ? What do you say? ? other race, but that's because if the lifestyle that America brought them up with, you know.

Here Scott projected in somewhat softer way by adding the diminutive (“a little more prejudice than the average”) as well as by blaming their prejudice on “the lifestyle that America brought them up with”). In the next section I examine the role of diminutives in color blind racetalk.

### **“It Makes Me a Little Angry...”: The Role of Diminutives in Color Blind Racetalk**

Because maintaining a non-racial, color blind stance is key, whites use diminutives to soften their racial blows. Hence, when they oppose affirmative action, few say, “I against affirmative action.” Instead, they say something such as, “I am just a little bit against affirmative action.” Similarly, few whites who oppose interracial marriage flatly state, “I am against interracial marriage.” Instead, they say something such as, “I am just a bit concerned about the welfare of the children.” About half of the college students used diminutives to cushion their views on issues such as interracial marriage and affirmative action. DAS respondents also used diminutives to maintain a nonracial image, however, and consistent with what I have documented for other rhetorical tools, less than a quarter of DAS respondents did so.

For instance, Andy, a student at WU, answered the question on interracial marriage as follows:

I would say I have a little bit of the same concern about the children just because it's more, I mean, would be more difficult on them. But, I mean, I definitely [**nervous laugh**] have no problem with any form of interracial marriage . . . Um, that's just, just an extra hurdle that they would have to over, overcome with the children, but, but I ? it wouldn't be a detriment to the kids, I don't think. That just makes it a little more difficult for them.

Mickey, a student at MU, used diminutives to make the claim that people at MU were oversensitive about matters regarding race or sexual orientation. Andy made his comments in response to a question about whether or not he participated in political activities in campus. After stating in no uncertain terms that he did not, the interviewer, curious by the tone of his answer, commented “You sounded pretty staunch in your no.” Andy replied:

Yeah, I just, I don't know. I think . . . everybody, everybody here just seems like really uptight about that kind of stuff and, I mean, maybe it's just because I never had to deal with that kind of stuff at home, but, ya' know, it seems

like you have to watch everything you say because if you slip a little bit, and you never know, there's a protest the next day. . .

When asked to explain what kind of "slips" he was referring to, Andy said,

Like, I mean, if you hear a professor say something, like a racial slur, or something just like a little bit, ya' know, a little bit outta hand, ya' know. I mean . . . I mean, I would just see it as like . . . ya' know, he was just, you took it out of context or something, but, ya' know, is just little things like that. It's just, it's so touchy. Everything is so touchy it seems like around here. And I don't, like . . . I don't like to get into debates about stuff and, ya' know, about cultures and stuff like that. 'Cause I've seen it, I've seen it around here, ya' know, plenty, ya know, about like, with religious stuff and gay stuff and minority stuff. And it's just nothin' of that, I just don't like to get into that stuff.

Thus, Mickey uses the diminutives to state that people at MU are hypersensitive because they protest when a professor does "little things" like saying "a racial slur" in class. Brian, the SU student cited above, after stating in a half-hearted way that he supported government intervention to increase the level of school integration in the country, commented the following on busing:

That works as long as – I think it's stupid, like I'm no sure the way things are going, but I heard things like people taking three hour bus rides just to be integrated into school, I mean, that's ridiculous. If there's a school closer by, you know, that just seems like, you know, going a little bit extreme on this integration thing, you know.

The following two examples illustrate how DAS respondents used diminutives. First is Rita, the underemployed woman in her twenties previously cited, stated her belief that blacks are naturally different than whites as follows:

Well [**clears throat**], I can't say . . . that generally they all are, but a lot of the ones I've encountered are a little more aggressive, a little bit more high tempered or whatever. . .

The second case is Judy, the college professor cited above, softened her opposition to affirmative action by using a diminutive.

I'm for it a little bit, not real dramatically. I think it's ah, I think is a temporary solution. Ah . . . I think it's bad when . . . if you have like, it's used for quotas.

### **"I, I, I, I Don't Mean, You Know, but. . .": Rhetorical Incoherence and Color Blindness**

Rhetorical incoherence (e.g., grammatical mistakes, lengthy pauses, repetition, etc.) is part of all natural speech. Nevertheless, the degree of incoherence increases noticeably when people discuss sensitive subjects. And

because the new racial climate in America forbids the open expression of racially-based feelings, views, and positions, when whites discuss issues that make them feel uncomfortable, they become almost incomprehensible. Almost all the college students and many DAS respondents became incoherent when discussing various racial issues, particularly when discussing their personal relationships with blacks. For example, Ray, a MU who was very articulate throughout the interview, became almost incomprehensible when answering the question about whether he had been involved with minorities while in college.

Um well, she's really my first girlfriend, to be quite honest with you [laughs]. Um ... uh, so to answer that question, no. Um, but I would not ... I mean, I would not ever ... preclude, uh, a black woman from being my girlfriend on the basis that she was black. Ya' know, I mean, ya' know what I mean? If you're looking about it from, ya' know, the standpoint of just attraction, I mean, I think that, ya' know ... I think, ya' know, I think, ya' know, all women are, I mean, all women have a sort of different type of beauty, if you will. And I think that, ya' know, for black women, it's somewhat different than white women. Um, but I don't think it's, ya know, I mean, it's, it's ... it's nothing that would ever stop me from like, uh ... I mean, I don't know, I mean, I don't if that's ... I mean, that's just sort of been my impression. I mean, it's not like! would ever say, "No, I'll never have a black girlfriend," but it just seems to me like I'm not as attracted to black women as I am to white women, for whatever reason. It's not about prejudice, it's just sort of like, ya' know, whatever. Just sort of the way, way ... like I see white women as compared to black women, ya' know?

The interviewer followed-up Ray's answer with the question, "Do you have any idea why that would be?," to which he replied the following: "I, I, I [sighs] don't really know. It's just sort of hard to describe. It's just like, ya' know, who you're more drawn to, ya' know, for whatever reason, ya' know?"

Another issue that made some students feel seemingly uncomfortable was the matter of self-segregation. For example, Ann, a WU student, became very hesitant in her answer to the question of whether blacks self-segregate or are not made to feel welcome.

Um, no, I don't think they segregate themselves, they just probably just, um, I guess probably they're ... I don't know. Let's see ... let's uh, try to ? Like um, we were trying ? Like um, mutual friends, I suppose, maybe ... and probably maybe it's just your peers that you know, or maybe that they, they have more, um, more like activities, or classes and clubs, I don't really know, but I don't think it's necessarily conscious, un, I don't ... I wouldn't say that uh, I would feel uh, uncomfortable going and talking to a whole group.

DAS respondents were significantly less likely to become incoherent than the students, but when they became, it was around the same issues.

For example, Dorothy a retired worker from an automobile company in her seventies, became almost incomprehensible when she answered the question on intermarriage.

Eh, well, I donno, but I, I, I feel that uh, I donno, I just feel like, that uh, you should (**low voice**) stick to your own race for marriage [**Interviewer: Um, and why is that?**] Uh because I feel that there's uh proble ... there would be problems on both sides. A girl would feel hurt ... if uh, if his parents, you know were [**End of Tape 1. Interviewer asked her to continue her answer**] Yeah, I really do. Well, I donno ... they have different culture that we do, really ... and I think that his family would be, would probably be just as upset ... I watch this on TV everyday and see how, you know, how they uh, they have a different, I donno, I hear the men, I know I hear that the black men on TV say that the ... black women are so, you know, so wild and mad, you know ... tempers, you know what I mean. And I just feel that's the limit ... I donno. I my dau ... if one of my daughters would ah, married one, I would have accepted it because it's my daughter ... and I would, I wo, and I would have never be, I would never be nasty to them. Because I feel they're just as human as we are. If they treat me decent, I'm gonna treat them decent. That's my feelings!

Dorothy's incoherence "makes sense" in light of her *openly* expressed opposition to interracial marriages (**[low voice]** "you should stick to your own race for marriage"). Because opposing interracial marriage in an open fashion violates the notion of color blindness, white respondents who took this stance felt forced to "soften" the blow. That is why Dorothy added all the qualifications about what she would have done if one of her own daughters had "married one" and why she felt compelled to insert the profoundly awkwardly stated statement about the equality of the races ("they're just as human as we are").

Lynn, a human resource manager in her early fifties, expressed her reservations about dating black men in her response to a question on dating.

I don't know. Just ... well (**high pitched voice**) ... I think I would have been very uncomfortable, okay, I really do. I mean, it would just be, I (**raises voice**) wouldn't want to go out with a, ah ... ah ... really dark Middle Eastern man, or Indian, or Oriental. I mean, I, I just would be uncomfortable. If they're closer to me in looks, okay. That's just always the way I felt. Not that I didn't like men of ethnic diversity, but I just ... you have a certain taste, you know. I think I do.

Since Lynn had stated something that could be interpreted as "racist," she had to do lots of rhetorical work to explain her position on interracial marriage.

I have mixed emotions on it. I feel that two people can fall in love and it, you know, can build a strong bond with one another, but also, you know, there

are consequences to that unfortunately in this world, and so it would be a very difficult relationship. If my daughter or son were to date somebody of another ethnic background, black especially, I'd be uncomfortable. But not anymore so than if they were dating, like I said, an Indian, or a ah ... ah Mexican or a non Caucasian. I just would be [**Interviewer: Umhum.**] Even an Italian. I don't know why, I mean, it, 'cause I'm not ... in fact, I, I, you know, I think the black race is one of the most gentle races of all of them. I think that they are violent out of emotion not out of indecisiveness or evilness. They are not that spicy, but, I don't know.

As in Dorothy's case, Lynn felt obliged to clarify that she is not a racist ("cause I'm not ... (a racist)") and to insert a truly odd statement about the gentleness of blacks at *the same time* that she claims that blacks are violent by nature ("I think that they are violent out of emotion").

DAS respondents, similar to college students, became nervous when discussing matters other than interracial marriage. For example, Eric, an auditor for an automotive company, became anxious when discussing whether or not he associates with his black co-workers.

Sure ... sure ... you can, ah, it's ... if you work in that environment ... the, the race is there obviously. I don't think it will ever go away, but ... ah ... I don't practice it and I see a lot of people who don't practice it. The, they, you know, but it's existing and I know that and I don't. Yeah, I, I, I, I go out with the black guys. I don't even care. It don't matter to me.

## Conclusion

If the myth of color blind racism is going to stick, whites need to have tools to repair mistakes (or the appearance of mistakes) rhetorically. In this article I documented the numerous tools available to whites to restore a color blind image when whiteness seeps through discursive cracks. Color blind racism's racetalk avoids racist terminology and preserves its myth through semantic moves such as "I am not a racist, but," "Some of my best friends are ...," "I am not black, but," and "Yes and no." Additionally, when something could be interpreted as racially motivated, whites can use the "Anything but race" strategy. Thus, if a school or neighborhood is completely white, they can say "It's not a racial thing" or "It's economics, not race." They can also project the matter onto blacks by saying things such as "They don't want to live with us" or "Blacks are the really prejudiced ones."

But how can whites protect themselves against the charge of racism when they state positions that may be interpreted as racist? They can use diminutives as racial shock absorbers and utter statements such as "I am a little bit against affirmative action because it is terribly unfair to whites" or "I am a bit concerned about interracial marriage because the children

suffer so much.” And these tools can be mixed-up as the interlocutor sees fit (Wetherell and Potter 1992). Hence, respondents could use a diminutive (“I am a little bit upset with blacks. . .”), followed by a projection (“. . . because they cry racism for everything even though they are the ones who are racist. . .”), and balanced out their statement with semantic moves at the end to land safely (“. . . and I am not being racial about this, is just that, I don’t know”).

These interviews also revealed that talking about race in America is a highly emotional matter. Almost all the respondents exhibited a degree of incoherence at some point or other in the interview. Digressions, long pauses, repetition, and self corrections were the order of the day. This incoherent talk is the result of talking about race in a world that insists race does not matter rather than a tool of color blindness. However, since it is so preminent, it must be included as part of the linguistic modalities of color blind racism.

An important point to make is that college students were more likely than DAS respondents to use semantic moves such as “I am not a racist, but,” “Some of my best friends are. . .,” “Yes and no,” and “I am not black, but.” The students were also more likely to use diminutives to soften their racial views and to become incoherent when discussing sensitive racial matters. DAS respondents, however, were more likely to project than the students and used the “Anything but race” strategy at a similar rate than students. These findings match my findings from previous research showing that DAS respondents were more likely to use the frames of color blind racism in a crude and direct fashion as compared with the college students (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2001).

Why is this the case? Preliminary analysis of survey and interview data from these two data sets suggest that younger, educated, middle class people are more likely than older, less educated, working class people to make full use of the resources of color blind racism. This does not mean they are less “racist.” It just means that they are more adept at navigating the dangerous waters of America’s contemporary racial landscape and to know all the stylistic tools available to save face. This should not be surprising since they are the cohort that has been ingrained from day one with the ideology of color blindness.

However, it is worth noting that young, educated, middle class DAS respondents are not too far off from their older, less educated, working class counterparts in their crudeness and lack of rhetorical sophistication. This may well mean that as whites enter the labor market, they feel entitled to vent their resentment in a relative straightforward manner. No need to sweeten the pill when you feel morally entitled to get a job or promotion over all blacks since you believe they are “not qualified” when you believe

the taxes you pay are being largely wasted on “welfare-dependent blacks,” when you are convinced that blacks use discrimination as an excuse to cover up for their own inadequacies.

Finally, I end with a methodological observation that has policy implications. If there is a new racial ideology that has an arsenal of rhetorical tools to avoid the appearance of racism, analysts must be fully aware of its existence and develop the analytical and interpretive know-how to dissect color blind nonsense. Analysts unaware of these developments (or unwilling to accept them) will continue producing research suggesting that racial matters in the United States have improved dramatically and, like color blinders, urge for race-neutral social policies. It is the task of progressive social scientists to expose color blindness, show the continuing significance of race, and wake-up color blind researchers to the color of the facts of race in contemporary United States.

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