

Ideologies of language and race in US media discourse about the Trayvon Martin shooting

A D A M H O D G E S

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines the discourse about race and racism that ensued in the US media after the shooting death of an African American youth, Trayvon Martin, by a neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, in February 2012. The analysis examines news programs from the three major cable television channels in the United States: CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. The theoretical framework builds upon Hill's (2008) discussion of the 'folk theory of race and racism' in contrast to critical race theory, and asks, to what extent does the mainstream media's discourse about race remain embedded in folk ideas and to what extent (if at all) does the conversation move beyond those ideas? The paper aims to unpack the ideologies of race and language that underpin talk about race and racism in an effort to expose the hidden assumptions in the discourse that hinder more productive dialogue on the topic. (Critical race theory, folk theory of race and racism, George Zimmerman, ideology, language ideology, media discourse, race, race talk, racism, slurs, Trayvon Martin)*

I N T R O D U C T I O N

On the evening of February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American high school student, was fatally shot by George Zimmerman, a twenty-eight-year-old neighborhood watch volunteer. The shooting occurred after Zimmerman had followed Martin through the neighborhood where he was staying and a confrontation ensued. Zimmerman claimed self-defense in the incident and police let him go that night with no charge. After no further action was taken, Trayvon Martin's family held a press conference to voice their frustrations over the lack of an arrest. A few days later, the story began to receive national media attention, which generated a great deal of nationwide discussion about race and racism through the summer of 2013 when Zimmerman faced trial and was ultimately acquitted of murder.

In this article, I explore how race and racism factored into the mainstream media discourse that developed around the death of Trayvon Martin and trial of George

Zimmerman. I provide a case study that examines coverage from the three major cable channels in the United States: CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. Although only part of the broader national conversation that took place, the reactions found on these networks provide important insight into mainstream views on race and racism. Many commentators have claimed that the United States entered a so-called ‘postracial’ era with the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president. In addition, it is widely recognized that racial attitudes have shifted away from the overt prejudice that was the norm prior to the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Today, most people denounce racism and publicly deny being racist (van Dijk 1992). Yet, as sociologists and race scholars have shown, racism—in its twenty-first century incarnation—remains a formidable barrier for African Americans and other minority groups in an American society that remains structured around white privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2013).

Scholarship has examined the workings of this new form of racism—sometimes termed *colorblind racism* (Bonilla-Silva 2013) or *racism 2.0* (Wise 2009)—from the perspective of social theory. In addition, language scholars have examined how everyday language supports this racism (van Dijk 1987; Bonilla-Silva & Forman 2000; Hill 2008), how attitudes toward language act as a proxy for attitudes about race (Lippi-Green 2011) and support discrimination (Baugh 2003), how language use as it varies by race impacts educational strategies and policy debates (Rickford & Rickford 2000; Alim & Smitherman 2012), and how discourse operates in racializing practices (Dick & Wirtz 2011) and the construction of racial identities (Bucholtz & Trechter 2001), including how racial identities intersect with other social categories (Alim & Reyes 2011). Much of this work endeavors to break down oversimplifications with a critical eye focused on ‘complicating race’ (Alim & Reyes 2011). Yet further work remains to integrate a discourse centered approach to race and racism with concepts from social theory in an effort to better inform the everyday understandings that impact public thinking.

This article therefore brings together perspectives from critical race theory (Omi & Winant 1994; Feagin 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2013) with work in linguistic anthropology on language ideologies (Silverstein 1979; Woolard & Schieffelin 1994; Kroskrity 2004; Gal 2005; Bucholtz & Hall 2008; Hill 2008), and adopts the concern in critical discourse analysis with the ideological underpinnings of discourse (e.g. Fairclough 1989; van Dijk 1998) to explore the way ideologies of language and race underpin talk about race and racism. The aim of the analysis is to expose the hidden assumptions in the discourse that hinder more productive dialogue. In particular, I draw from Hill’s (2008) discussion of the ‘folk theory of race and racism’ in contrast to critical theoretical concepts, and ask: To what extent does the mainstream media’s discourse about race after Trayvon remain embedded in folk ideas and to what extent (if at all) does the conversation move beyond those ideas?

The discourse data that form the basis of the analysis come from a corpus of television show transcripts from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. The transcripts¹ were collected using the LexisNexis database with the search terms ‘Trayvon Martin’.

The corpus covers a sixteen-month period that stretches from March 2012 through the end of July 2013. Trayvon's shooting began to garner national media attention around March 12, 2012; and the verdict in Zimmerman's trial was delivered on July 13, 2013. Thus, the corpus includes discussions that took place in the media from the time the nation became aware of the shooting through the post-trial period. In the analysis, I focus primarily on data during the first few months after the shooting as discussants worked to frame how race and racism factored into the incident. These same perspectives dominated the discourse through the end of the trial.

The theoretical framework used in the analysis looks at racial and language ideologies in tandem, adopting an approach similar to the one used by Hill (2008) to examine the way language ideologies underpin the everyday language of racism. As Gal (2005:24) suggests, 'language ideologies are never only about language'. Rather, they 'provide insights into the working of ideologies more generally'. Before moving into the analysis, I lay out the theoretical groundwork. First, I contrast the dominant racial ideology in American society, which is represented by what Hill (2008) terms the 'folk theory of race and racism', with ideas from critical race theory. Next, I discuss the role that the language ideology of 'personalism' plays in supporting the folk conception of racism. In the analysis, I examine how folk ideas impact the discourse as the media focus on the issue of an alleged slur uttered by Zimmerman on the night of the shooting, and struggle to understand the concepts of racial profiling and hate crimes. The analysis endeavors to provide greater clarity on the way hidden ideological assumptions—about both race and language—shape and constrain mainstream media discourse, resulting in a narrow and limited understanding of racism. I end by discussing implications of the analysis for mainstream understandings of race and racism.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In her analysis of the everyday language of racism, Hill (2008) contrasts what she terms the 'folk theory of race and racism' with the critical theory of race and racism. Hill borrows the concept of 'folk theory' from D'Andrade (1995), who defines a folk theory (similar to the companion term 'folk model') as an explanatory framework adopted by a society to provide everyday understandings of the world. All societies employ folk theories, which may be quite complex. Yet folk theories differ from scientific theories in that they are not subject to falsification when met with contradictory evidence. In this way, 'The folk model may have a good deal of truth to it, but it is not science' (D'Andrade 1995:164).

As Hill (2008) elaborates, folk theorizing often handles contradictory evidence through the process of 'erasure' or by employing 'ad hoc' or 'stipulative' explanations. *Erasure*, as discussed by Irvine & Gal (2000, *inter alia*), is an ideological process that renders contradictory evidence invisible through 'forms of forgetting, denying, ignoring, or forcibly eliminating those distinctions or social facts that fail

to fit the picture' (Gal 2005:27). In this way, 'Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away' (Irvine & Gal 2000:38). Thus, a folk theory may be a very powerful model for understanding the world, bolstered by a great deal of work and intellectual energy, yet it lacks the accuracy of rigorous academic theories.

The power of folk theories derives from their close connection to everyday common sense thinking. Folk theories consist of taken-for-granted assumptions that people draw upon to interpret the world on a daily basis. Thus, like any hegemonic ideological system, folk theories can be difficult to dislodge from the collective imagination. Folk theories are naturalized as self-evident, immutable, and undeniable facts about 'the way things simply are'.

As a racially based framework that explains and justifies the racial status quo in American society, the folk theory of race and racism represents what Bonilla-Silva (2013) terms a hegemonic *racial ideology*. The folk theory qua ideology provides a set of ingrained assumptions that structure understandings about race and racism. Its ideological assumptions may at times even underpin the discourse of committed anti-racists who share many of the 'common sense' assumptions that circulate in society. Where discourses about race and racism in the wake of Trayvon's shooting draw from the folk theory's ideas (even if unwittingly), those discourses further rationalize the current racial structure. Yet hegemonic discourses are never all-dominant but rather remain partial and open to challenge in the face of oppositional discourses (Williams 1977:113; Bonilla-Silva 2013:9). In contrast to the assumptions of the folk theory are the ideas and concepts of the critical theory, which draws upon scientific and social scientific research in an effort to understand the nature of race and how racism operates in society.

Folk theory of race and racism vs. critical race theory

The folk theory and critical theory differ markedly in how they conceptualize race and racism. Central to the folk theory's understanding of race is an appeal to seemingly self-evident differences among people, such as skin color. These outward phenotypic differences are assumed to align with distinct clusters of genetic traits that developed during human evolution to form discrete types of people, or 'races'. In contrast to the folk theory, the critical theory recognizes that what are taken to be biologically given categories are in fact socially constructed categories. Human genetic variation is much more continuous than the discrete categories of race imply. Deciding how to divide the continuum of human variation into groups is a historically situated social process; and different societies at different points in history have devised different classificatory systems.

To say that race is socially constructed, as the critical theory claims, means that society provides an agreed-upon way to group people into categories. This process of racialization is supported by rules devised within the folk theory for how to sort people into those categories. Yet, as the critical theory points out, such rules are

social conceits rather than biological axioms. Nevertheless, to say that race is socially constructed does not mean that racial categories are any less real. It merely means that racial categories are real in a different way than if they were natural kinds. Namely, race is socially and politically real. It ‘produces real effects on the actors racialized as ‘black’ or ‘white’ (Bonilla-Silva 2013:9).

Since the folk theory sees racial differences as essential features of biology, it takes discrimination based on such differences to be a natural and inevitable aspect of the human condition. This does not justify racism, the folk theory holds, but it does provide the theory’s overriding explanation for why it exists: there will always be bigoted individuals who hate others because of their race, causing them to discriminate. Crucially, these assumptions lead the folk theory to locate racism in the individual. In this way, racism is reduced to ‘individual beliefs, intentions, and actions’ (Hill 2008:6). A great deal of discursive work is therefore undertaken by self-identified nonracists to call out and distance themselves from individuals deemed to be ‘racists’. This ‘hunting for “racists”’, as Bonilla-Silva (2013:15) describes it, involves the ‘careful separation of good and bad, tolerant and intolerant Americans’. It is often accomplished by pointing to outwardly racist behaviors and actions, such as the use of racial epithets or slurs (Hill 2008). Importantly, the folk theory’s reduction of racism to individual bigotry weakens the term, simply turning it into a synonym of *prejudice*.

What is missing from the folk conception of racism, according to critical race theory, is consideration of its collective and institutional dimensions. Along with the recognition that race is socially constructed, it is important to recognize that racism is socially produced and reproduced. Although it includes individual acts of bigotry, it is larger than any single individual and depends upon a social system to support it. *Racism* is therefore viewed as a set of collective cultural projects that create or maintain structures of domination based on categories of race (Omi & Winant 1994:71; Hill 2008:20–21). The systemic nature of racism (Feagin 2006) creates and perpetuates differential treatment of individuals by assigning racial groups to different rungs of the social hierarchy. In this way, racism is integrally linked with the operation of power and tied to the way a society distributes resources. Although embodied, the workings of contemporary racism are much more insidious and invisible than during the Jim Crow era.

Language ideologies, racial slurs, and the folk theory’s hunt for ‘racists’

As linguistic anthropologists have pointed out (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994; Gal 2005), language ideologies can serve to legitimate other types of ideologies, such as the dominant racial ideology represented by the folk theory of race and racism. Whereas ideology in the general sense of the term involves a system of thoughts and ideas that represents the world from the perspective of a particular social group, language ideologies involve sets of beliefs about language, language use or

language users (Silverstein 1979; Kroskrity 2004; Bucholtz & Hall 2008). As Hill (2008:33–34) describes, language ideologies ‘represent themselves as forms of common sense’; they ‘rationalize and justify the forms and functions of text and talk’. They persist ‘because they have a certain internal coherence... they resonate with other cultural ideas’, and ‘because they support and reassert the interests... of [many, but not all of] those who share them’. Although language ideologies can sometimes rise to the level of conscious awareness, they typically operate as unrecognized premises or taken-for-granted assumptions (Kroskrity 2004:505; Hill 2008:39). These assumptions, as Hill (2008:33) notes, ‘shape and constrain discourse’.

Of particular interest for the analysis that follows is the language ideology of ‘personalism’ (Rosaldo 1982), and, to a lesser extent, the language ideology of ‘referentialism’ (Silverstein 1976), and the related ‘baptismal ideology of meaning’. Personalism ‘holds that the most important part of linguistic meaning comes from the beliefs and intentions of the speaker’ (Hill 2008:38; see also, Rosaldo 1982; Duranti 1993; Hill 2000). Listeners must therefore calculate the speaker’s intentions to arrive at meaning (Johnstone 2008:235). When speakers communicate those intentions, they do so through words seen as stable carriers of meaning—an important element of referentialism’s view that language operates merely as a conveyor of information. As a result, words simply become containers of meaning, as Reddy (1979) points out in his critique of the ‘conduit metaphor’. In this way, words are assigned a single ‘correct’ meaning that can be traced ‘to an authoritative original source’ (Hill 2008:38) or baptismal moment.

These language ideologies, particularly the ideology of personalism, provide support for the folk theory by enabling the ‘hunting for “racists”’ (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Since racist intentions lie at the heart of the folk theory’s conception of racism, personalism aids the uncovering of racists by matching words to an individual’s true intentions and feelings, or ‘individual psychological dispositions’ (Bonilla-Silva 2013:7). As Hill (2008:65) describes, if a word ‘can be shown to be a slur that has ugly and pejorative meanings, then a person who uses it must be a racist who believes that the targets of the slur are ugly and deserving of the label and intends to communicate this fact’. In this way, uttering a slur—or conversely, not uttering a slur—provides important evidence for determining whether racism, according to the folk theory, exists in a particular interaction.

The ideologies of race and language therefore work in tandem to separate the good from the bad, the nonracists from the racists. As a consequence, the dominant racial ideology represented by the folk theory positions its limited view of racism (where to be a racist simply means to harbor hostility and ill feelings toward someone based on race) at the center of thinking about race. In the process, the complexities of (systemic and institutional) racism get erased from the discourse. The analysis that follows explores the way the issue of whether Zimmerman uttered a slur on the evening he killed Trayvon becomes central to the way the folk theory (supported by the language ideology of personalism) jockeyes with the critical perspective to shape views about how racism factored into the incident.

DISCOURSE OF RACE AND RACISM AFTER
TRAYVON'S SHOOTING

In the discourse surrounding Trayvon's shooting, arguably the most contentious aspect of the incident hinged on the different perceptions of the way race and racism factored into it. At the outset, the initial framing of the incident arose out of the frustrations expressed by Trayvon Martin's family at the lack of an arrest in his shooting. As the story gained attention in the national media, these frustrations were voiced in the type of coverage seen in excerpt (1) from CNN.

(1) Newsroom, CNN 1:00 PM EST, March 13, 2012

Malveaux: A family is calling for justice after a neighborhood watch captain shoots and kills an unarmed teenager. Seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot to death last month walking to his dad's house. The shooter, George Zimmerman, claims he acted in self-defense. Zimmerman has not been charged.

Which brings us to today's 'Talk Back' question, what do you think should happen?

Nazim says, "Outragous [sic]. If I, a black man, had done that to a white youth going home, just like this young man did, I would be in jail. Why did the block watch captain have a gun in the first place?"

Central to the framing of the issue in this line of reporting is a lack of justice. Questions are raised about why a teenager who is walking home, minding his own business, ends up being shot dead by a neighborhood watch volunteer who pursued him against the explicit advice of a police dispatcher. As can be seen in coverage like that in excerpt (1), these questions are intimately connected with race. The injustice resonates with many as another instantiation of a long historical pattern in US society where nonblack killers of blacks have literally gotten away with murder.

In excerpt (1), the viewer named Nazim quoted by CNN journalist Suzanne Malveaux points out what many in tune with historical patterns of racism in US society painfully recognize—namely, if the shooting had been done by a black man who followed a white person through the neighborhood, his claim of self-defense would have been met with a great deal more skepticism. As Childress (2012) suggests, such skepticism holds irrespective of whether a 'stand your ground' law is on the books, as it was in Florida.² It is through this historical lens—where the race of the victim has all too often determined whether the killer would be further investigated or simply set free—that the issue of Trayvon's shooting entered onto the national stage.

This initial framing of the case is conducive to a critical reading of the role played by race and racism, since it recognizes that racism consists of institutional biases that operate systemically. Where many questions existed about what happened and much doubt surrounded the circumstances of Trayvon's death, the police, acting in line with a history of institutional bias, chose to give the benefit of the doubt to Zimmerman at the scene of the shooting. This is how racism operates. It provides

default biases based on race that help decide who receives the benefit of the doubt in certain situations. At issue in this framing, therefore, is the lack of justice served by the police (and by the system) in holding a young black man's shooter accountable. There is concern that this fits a historical pattern of systemic, institutional racism.

Discourse surrounding racial slurs in the folk theory's hunt for 'racists'

Yet in its conceptualization of racism, the folk theory does not recognize its institutional and systemic dimensions. For this reason, the initial framing of the incident does not accord well with the assumptions of the folk theory. According to the folk theory, racism on the institutional level is a thing of the past, supposedly having been overcome with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. After leaving behind the Jim Crow era, the nation is viewed as having purged itself of institutional racism. Insofar as racism still exists, it is seen as merely existing in uneducated, backward individuals. Thus, if racism is an issue in Trayvon's shooting, according to the logic of folk theory, then it could only be an issue insofar as the shooter was a racist—again, where a racist is defined as someone harboring hostility and ill intent toward Trayvon because of his skin color.

The question of whether Zimmerman uttered a racial slur during a call to police on the night of the shooting therefore becomes central to establishing his racist credentials. On March 21 and April 4, 2012, Anderson Cooper's show on CNN dedicated substantial air time to playing the 911 tape and trying to determine if Zimmerman uttered a slur. In excerpt (2), Cooper introduces the show on March 21.

(2) Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees, CNN 10:00 PM EST, March 21, 2012

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

... Now, before we tell you what the alleged slur is, we're going to let you listen for yourself with fresh ears and make up your own mind what you hear. For that, we enlisted the help of one of CNN's top audio engineers. We need to warn some of you, the language you're going to hear is offensive, but we're going to play it for you without bleeping anything, because it's evidence, and if we bleep it, you're going to have a harder time hearing what some believe is a racial slur.

As he sets up the show in excerpt (2) Cooper asks, "Did he use a racist slur?" The answer to the question, underpinned by the language ideology of personalism, holds important weight within the framework of the folk theory; and the question forms the basis of the show's featured report that night. Cooper frames the answer as an either-or response (much like the folk theory frames individuals as *either* racists *or* nonracists): "Some hear an ugly racial insult and an expletive. Others hear nothing of the sort." As he prepares to play the tape, Cooper promises to

let the viewers “listen for yourself with fresh ears and make up your own mind”. To help the audience determine what was uttered, the show “enlisted the help of one of CNN’s top audio engineers”. The show then cuts to a prerecorded video that features CNN correspondent Gary Tuchman in an audio editing room with Rick Sierra, CNN’s audio design specialist. Excerpt (3) picks up as the videotape begins to play.

- (3) Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees, CNN 10:00 PM EST, March 21, 2012
Participants: Gary Tuchman, CNN correspondent; Rick Sierra, CNN audio design specialist; George Zimmerman, shooting suspect

[Begin videotape]

- Tuchman: This is edit room 31 at CNN Center in Atlanta. This is one of the most sophisticated audio edit suites in the broadcast news business. Right here is Rick Sierra.
- He’s our audio design specialist. He’s one of the best audio experts in the business.
- Rick, if you can, I have not listened to this portion of the 911 tape at all. I just want to hear it raw right now, if you can play maybe ten seconds before it and let’s listen.
- Sierra: OK.
- Zimmerman: ... down towards the entrance of the neighborhood.
- Unidentified male: OK. Which entrance is that that he’s headed towards?
- Zimmerman: The back entrance. [*unintelligible*]
- Tuchman: [*voice-over*] You may not have heard the moment in question, because it was so quick.
- [*on camera*] How long does that portion last that everyone is talking about?
- Sierra: A second, eighteen frames.
- Tuchman: Eighteen frames, so that’s about 1.6 seconds?
- Sierra: Correct.
- Tuchman: So let’s listen to it like ten times in a row if we can.
- Sierra: OK.
- Tuchman: [*voice-over*] What we’re listening for is the racial slur ‘coons’. It follows the ‘F’ word. Some people say they hear it. Others say they don’t.
- Zimmerman: Fucking coons. Fucking coons. Fucking coons.
- Tuchman: [*on camera*] It’s certainly a lot clearer when we listen to it this way.
- Sierra: Correct.
- Tuchman: Is there anything else we can do with that audio to make it even clearer?
- Well, you can—I already did a little bit of boosting at 2.2 kilo hertz and at 4.6.
- Sierra: It’s boosting the high end of the voice.

When listening to the show, the utterance is undoubtedly difficult to decipher. In the written transcripts provided by CNN and shown in excerpt (3), the first pass of the utterance is even marked ‘unintelligible’. This is followed by Tuchman’s voice-over in which he states: “You may not have heard the moment in question, because it was so quick.” Tuchman and Sierra then determine that the segment in question amounts to “about 1.6 seconds”.

From an intertextual perspective, the insertion of this clip from the 911 tape into the context of the news program provides a fascinating look at media recontextualization. Obviously, the evidence is anything but self-evident and the journalists must do quite a bit of discursive work to both precontextualize and recontextualize the tape. As Oddo (2014) discusses, *precontextualization* involves a process whereby future words are previewed and evaluated before they are spoken. This goes hand in hand with the process of recontextualization whereby prior words are replayed with ‘varying degrees of reinterpretation’ (Bakhtin 1986:91; Bauman & Briggs 1990). Despite the promise to let viewers hear for themselves the tape, Cooper, in excerpt (2), and Tuchman, in excerpt (3), precontextualize the tape by providing a supportive context for hearing a slur. Notably, in excerpt (2), Cooper issues a warning for viewer discretion: “We need to warn some of you, the language you’re going to hear is offensive.” This both presupposes a possible slur and primes viewers to cognitively assimilate the sounds they hear into a slur.

After the initial pass of the segment in excerpt (3), Tuchman directs Sierra to play it again: “So let’s listen to it like ten times in a row if we can.” In a subsequent voice-over, Tuchman directs the audience on what to hear: “What we’re listening for is the racial slur ‘coons’. It follows the ‘F’ word.” The tape then repeats the same 1.6-second segment several times in quick succession. This time, the CNN transcript provides intelligible words in line with the prompt from the journalist on what to hear: “Fucking coons. Fucking coons. Fucking coons.” Anderson Cooper’s show on April 4 revisited the topic. Again, the show featured a pre-recorded segment inside an audio editing room with another expert audio engineer. This time, however, they determined that the word was ‘cold’ not ‘coons’.

The key point of interest for the current analysis is not which interpretation is the ‘correct’ one. Rather, the point is to underscore how the media’s focus on whether or not a racist slur was uttered in a difficult-to-decipher 1.6-second clip relates to the dominant ideology. Namely, the exercise in accusing or absolving Zimmerman of uttering a slur provides meaning to the incident in line with the folk theory’s conception of racism. It directs participants in the conversation to engage in a binary debate over whether racism had anything to do with the incident, overlooking the complex ways subtle forms of racism undergirded the incident from the moment Zimmerman began following Trayvon to the police department’s response. Anderson Cooper, like his CNN colleague Piers Morgan (featured later), arguably lean to the liberal end of the spectrum as opposed to journalists on the conservative Fox News channel. However, folk ideological assumptions run deeper than these ordinary political distinctions.

To be clear, the issue of whether a racial slur was uttered does hold some import in that a violent act committed with racial animus constitutes a hate crime. Moreover, for the FBI to get involved in the prosecution of a hate crime against Zimmerman, they would have to show that he acted with overt racial bias against Trayvon. Thus, from a legal perspective, whether or not Zimmerman uttered a racist slur could help determine if he acted with racial animus and could be charged

accordingly. Historically, the struggle for civil rights has been marked by cases where the federal government has been able to pursue justice where local or state authorities have deliberately turned a blind eye toward crimes against African Americans. Given the apparent inadequacies of the local police department's response, the federal government could potentially guarantee some justice if it could find evidence of a hate crime.

Yet the conversation in the media struggled to provide the historical and social context for any potential federal involvement in the case. More importantly, rather than delving into a critically informed discussion of hate crime or, more critically, how the Sanford police department's actions could be viewed through the lens of institutional racism, the media's focus on the slur simply feeds the folk theory's obsession with hunting for racists and elides from consideration the subtle forms of racism that impacted the incident. It was as if Zimmerman could only be culpable for killing Trayvon if he were a 'racist' in the image of a Ku Klux Klan member. On the flip side, if Zimmerman could be proven not to be a racist (per the folk theory's conception), then the killing could somehow be seen as defensible, or at least having nothing to do with race.

The next excerpt illustrates the way the slur features into the discourse vis-à-vis the folk theory. Here, Sean Hannity of Fox News interviews George Zimmerman's father, Robert Zimmerman.

(4) Hannity: Interview with Robert Zimmerman, Fox 9:30 PM EST, April 4, 2012

Hannity: There have been implications of that been made. One was that on the 911 tape that we just played, that he might have used a racial slur. That has been countered by other people.

Two stories that I recently read, and one is that is it true that your son would tutor African-American and minority children on the weekend.

And is it also true that there was a case involving the Sanford police in which one of— a son of a police officer hit an African-American homeless man and he spoke out against the policeman. Is that true, too, sir?

Zimmerman: It is true. Concerning the assault on the homeless man, he went around to churches and put flyers on people's cars. He just felt sorry for this homeless man not having anyone to support him. And he—

Hannity: Has he ever used any racial slur that you know of, sir?

Zimmerman: None whatsoever.

In the exchange in excerpt (4), Hannity begins his line of questioning with reference to the controversy surrounding the alleged slur. As noted earlier, finding a clear cut racial motive would satisfy the folk theory's concern that the incident involved racism. Likewise, determining that George Zimmerman did not use a slur would absolve him from holding racist intentions and thereby dismiss racism as a concern in the incident. Hannity inquires, "Has he [George] ever used any racial slur that you know of, sir?" Robert Zimmerman responds, "None whatsoever".

The implication here is clear according to the logic of the folk theory—namely, George Zimmerman is not a racist.

In Hannity's preface to this question about the slur, he mentions two stories about George Zimmerman that further establish his nonracist credentials per the folk theory. The first is that he "would tutor African American and minority children on the weekend". According to the folk theory, such a benevolent action lies at odds with racist practices. The second story involves the way he stood up for an African American homeless man who was unjustly treated by the police. Both these stories received ample discussion in the national media; and both imply that such actions are at odds with the folk theory's conception of someone who would harbor racist intentions. The conclusion, therefore, is not only that Zimmerman is not a racist, but also, as a result, that race and racism have nothing to do with Zimmerman's shooting of Trayvon.

The reframing of the incident into an either-or question of whether Zimmerman is a racist simplifies the complexities of racism. It rejects the historical context provided in the initial framing of the incident, and turns the discussion away from understanding racism as systemic, institutional, and often invisible. It also works to uphold the racial status quo by denying the legitimacy of the critical perspective provided in the initial framing. Instead, it provides a reading of the shooting in line with the dominant ideology of the folk theory.

Discourse surrounding 'racial profiling' and its confusion with 'hate crimes'

The media discussion quickly began to focus on the issue of racial profiling. Although the concept of racial profiling requires critical concepts to fully understand and articulate, the folk theory nevertheless finds a way to handle it within its own framework. On the one hand, racial profiling strikes at the heart of the critical theory's concern with systemic, institutionalized practices. On the other hand, the embodiment of racial profiling in the actions of individuals appeals to the folk theory's focus on individual psychological dispositions. Crucially, understandings of racial profiling depend upon understandings about race and racism, which vary considerably between the critical and folk perspectives. Thus, a situation develops where everyone across the nation is ostensibly talking about the same topic—racial profiling—and yet operating with different working definitions of that topic. In this way, much of the discourse on racial profiling in relation to the case lacked a common ground starting point.

Moreover, where the folk theory fails to recognize forms of racism beyond individual, racially motivated bigotry, the discourse surrounding racial profiling confuses the concept with racially motivated hate crimes. This focuses the discourse on the issue of racist intent per the folk theory's focus on individual psychological dispositions (bolstered by the language ideology of personalism), and erases from

consideration forms of systemic and institutional racism recognized by the critical perspective.

In the next excerpt, CNN's Piers Morgan interviews George Zimmerman's brother, and addresses the issue of the alleged racial slur introduced earlier.

(5) Piers Morgan, CNN 9:00 PM EST, March 29, 2012

- Morgan: I mean, CNN got that slowed down, replayed it ten times. I heard it. I'm pretty sure what I heard. I'm pretty sure it was a racial slur. What else could it have been?
- Zimmerman: It could have been anything. If we slowed—
- Morgan: You know your brother.
- Zimmerman: I do.
- Morgan: And you look like him, you sound like him.
- Zimmerman: Right. He speaks two languages fluently.
- Morgan: What do you think he's saying?
- ...
- Morgan: You know what, the reason I'm asking is that if he is saying what I and many others believe him to be saying, it adds a racial element to this. It adds fuel to the fire that this was a case of racial profiling, that your brother saw a young black boy in a hoodie and decided he had to deal with him.

In excerpt (5), Morgan notes of the sound heard on the 911 tape (recall excerpt (3)), "I'm pretty sure it was a racial slur". He then asks Zimmerman, "What do you think he's saying?" After Zimmerman's response (which unsurprisingly fails to confirm it was a slur), Morgan provides further context for understanding the import of the question: "the reason I'm asking... It adds fuel to the fire that this was a case of racial profiling." Here, Morgan seems to conflate the notion of racial profiling with a hate crime. However, this makes sense within the bounds of the folk theory where subtle forms of systemic racism are erased from consideration and one is only left with racism in the form of individual animus and bigotry. The line of reasoning explicitly articulated by Morgan follows the folk theory's premise that race could only have factored into the incident if Zimmerman was a 'racist' in terms of holding hostility and ill will toward Trayvon based on his race.

Morgan returns to the issue of the slur on his April 5 show as he talks with his guest, Charles Blow from The New York Times.

(6) Piers Morgan, CNN 9:00 PM EST, April 5, 2012

- Morgan: Now, earlier on CNN, this was played repeatedly. Enough times, and, you know, again, this is changing every day. Yesterday, it appeared to be f-ing cold. Today, it seems to be more likely and this is the view being put forward by Zimmerman's attorneys that actually the wording was 'F-ing punks'.
- Now, whether it's F-ing cold or F-ing punks, what it isn't is a racist comment.
- ...

I mean, you know, there's very little evidence if you actually study it.

...

Very little evidence to suggest that he is racist. There just isn't any.

...

...the allegation that he's racist and acting from a racially motivated intent with Trayvon Martin at the moment, I think, is unproven.

Blow: Well, it's not proven, however, that—setting it up that way, Piers, is a logical fallacy. You do not have to be a raging, you know, white sheet-wearing racist your entire life to act in a moment on a racial prejudice.

And so I think we have to always separate those two things out. I can be involved with all sorts of people my entire life, treat them very nicely, and at the same time, at a point where I find myself feeling threatened, I can act on racial prejudice. Those things are not usually [mutually] exclusive. People have to really stop setting those things up to be opposites.

Notably, in excerpt (6), the debate over what was thought to be heard on the 911 tapes—oscillating in the national conversation from 'coons' to 'cold' to 'punks'—frames the segment. At this point, Morgan appears convinced that the alleged slur failed to materialize as such with the word now thought to be 'cold' or 'punks'. Morgan spells out the consequences of this: "Now, whether it's F-ing cold or F-ing punks, what it isn't is a racist comment." With the slur now withdrawn as evidence, the charge of racism falls away per the folk theory. Also in line with the folk theory, this absolves the incident of having anything to do with race or racism.

In the exchange, Blow resists Morgan's implication that racism is not an issue just because Zimmerman might be absolved from being a racist per the folk theory's conception—which Blow poetically phrases as being "a raging, you know, white sheet-wearing racist your entire life". Blow attempts to distinguish between a racially motivated act of violence (hate crime) and actions motivated by racially biased assumptions (racial profiling). As he explains, one can deny any outward racial animus but still "act on racial prejudice. Those things are not usually [mutually] exclusive. People have to really stop setting those things up to be opposites". Here, Blow pushes the conversation away from the assumptions of the folk theory and attempts to introduce a more nuanced understanding of racism per the critical theory.

Defined as casting suspicion upon someone as having committed an offense due to their race, the critical perspective views racial profiling as part of the systemic forms of racism that include stereotyped attitudes and discriminatory habits and actions (Feagin 2006:xii). Notably, racial profiling draws from negative stereotypes, such as the image of young black men as criminals, to cast suspicion on innocent individuals who fit that racial classification. This practice depends upon a racialized system that cultivates cultural stereotypes in line with the racial order. Those stereotypes then work to maintain the racial order. Although racial profiling can be conscious, it need not be and often occurs as the result of unexamined assumptions that permeate quotidian interactions. Even racial minorities often internalize aspects of the dominant racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2013).

Work in social psychology has shown that the stereotype of blacks as violent and criminal is alive and well in American society (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davis 2004:876, *inter alia*). But most importantly, studies demonstrate that this stereotype cannot be explained—as the folk theory would have it—simply as the conscious manifestation of an overt racist’s bigoted beliefs and actions. Rather, the consistent and frequent association between blacks and crime generally occurs automatically. That is, the operation of such stereotypes is not subject to intentional control but is rather the result of internalized understandings that become ingrained as part of our habitual actions. In other words, such stereotypes become part of what Bourdieu (1977) terms the *habitus*—a set of predispositions for acting in the world.

Note that one need not identify as a racist nor intend ill will toward someone based on race to trigger a racial stereotype. As Wise (2010:v) writes, ‘implicit racial biases (which often exist side-by-side with an outwardly non-racist demeanor and persona) frequently influence the way we view and treat others’. This cannot be explained by the folk theory. Rather, one needs the critical theory to fully grasp the complexity of racist stereotypes. This requires recognizing that racism not only operates in a visible manner, as it does in the overt words of hate hurled by bigots; but that it also operates much more invisibly, as it does in the habitual response to casting a young black man as ‘suspicious’ as he walks through a neighborhood at night. The fact that blacks are often racially profiled typically goes unnoticed and unacknowledged by those who have never had to experience such forms of racism themselves—such as the familiar Driving While Black (DWB) encounters widely recognized among African Americans. Feagin and Vera use the term *social alexithymia* to refer to ‘the inability of a great many whites to understand where African Americans and other people of color are coming from and what their racialized experiences are like’ (Feagin 2010:89). The folk theory does not have a way to handle such racialized experiences, including racial profiling.

The next two excerpts illustrate the way understandings of racial profiling are refracted through the lens of the folk theory by reducing the concept of racial profiling to being a ‘racist’ and hence conflating racial profiling with a hate crime.

(7) Piers Morgan, CNN 9:00 PM EST, April 4, 2012

Uhrg: ... Let me suggest something to you. It is a terrible tragedy that Trayvon Martin is dead. His parents are suffering unimaginable grief. The grief is not being helped by people coming to town, telling falsehoods in order to raise racial strife.

The morning of February 26th, we had a peaceful community where blacks and whites went to church together, stood in line at the grocery together, and didn’t think that we had a problem. After some folks came to town and had their little rallies and made irresponsible speeches about murder and racial profiling— he’s not a racist, it wasn’t profiling.

(8) Hannity: Interview with George Zimmerman, Fox 9:00 PM EST, July 3, 2012

Hannity: What do you want to say to people that did rush to judgment, that suggested that there was racial profiling in this case, and that there was some other motivation in this case?

Zimmerman: That I'm not a racist and I'm not a murderer.

In excerpt (7), CNN journalist Piers Morgan is talking with Hal Uhrig, attorney for George Zimmerman. The topic of racial profiling has arisen and Uhrig responds to defend his client, saying: "he's not a racist, it wasn't profiling." Likewise in excerpt (8), Fox News journalist Sean Hannity interviews George Zimmerman, and asks him: "What do you want to say to people... that suggested that there was racial profiling in this case...?" In his response, Zimmerman replies, "I'm not a racist."

Embedded in both of these responses is an implicit understanding of racial profiling based upon the folk theory's conception of racism as something only practiced by outwardly identifiable 'racists'. In this way, racial profiling is stripped of its systemic, institutionalized aspects and focus is placed solely on the actions and intentions of the individual who must be labeled either a racist or not a racist. If Zimmerman is found not to be a racist, according to the folk theory, he therefore could not have racially profiled Martin. Importantly, the unconscious enactment of racial stereotypes that are shared by even outwardly nonracist individuals is elided from consideration.

What is often lost in such discussions of racial profiling is an explicit articulation of how the term is defined. The next two excerpts feature instances where attempts are made by speakers to do just that from a critical perspective.

(9) Special forum hosted by Soledad O'Brien, Beyond Trayvon: Race and Justice in America, CNN 10:00 PM EST, March 31, 2012

O'Brien: Do you have to be a racist, and sometimes I think we throw that word around a lot, but do you have to be a racist to racially profile somebody?

Ogletree: No, not at all. ...

(10) Jane Velez-Mitchell, CNN 7:00 PM EST, April 12, 2012
Natalie Jackson, attorney for Trayvon Martin's family

Jackson: Well, first of all, no one said 'racism'. That's the jump that always gets made from racial profiling. Racial profiling means that you thought something negative of someone based on the way what [sic] they appeared in their race. That doesn't mean that you're a racist.

In both of these excerpts, the assumptions of the folk theory are directly confronted and challenged. In excerpt (9), CNN journalist Soledad O'Brien queries Charles Ogletree, a professor at the Harvard Law School, on the nature of racial profiling. "Do you have to be a racist...to racially profile somebody?" asks O'Brien. In

response, Ogletree replies, “No, not at all.” Likewise, in excerpt (10) from another show on CNN, Natalie Jackson, the Martin family’s attorney, attempts to detach the concept of racial profiling from the folk theory’s fixation on hunting for racists. After defining racial profiling, she notes that it “doesn’t mean that you’re a racist”. That is, it doesn’t mean you’re a racist as the term is defined within the folk theory. Where the folk theory simply views racial profiling through the lens of individual bigotry, the critical perspective recognizes that the practices of negative stereotyping and racial profiling are distributed across a wide range of individuals and institutions.

In examples such as these, a few lessons might be drawn for those interested in shifting public understandings of race and racism. After all, dialogue about race that truly seeks to overcome racism requires the arduous task of supplanting folk ideas with critically informed understandings. Crucially, the chance must be seized to redefine terms that have taken-for-granted meanings, such as the term *racism*. As discussed earlier, definitions of racism differ markedly between the folk theory and critical theory. All too often, however, speakers attempting to insert a critical perspective into discussions simply accept the working definition provided by the dominant ideology. In excerpt (10), Jackson defines racial profiling but fails to redefine racism in critical terms. As a result, the move may fall short with those viewers that implicitly think ‘individual bigotry’ (per the folk theory) when they hear the term *racism*. Likewise, in (9), the exchange works to educate the audience about racial profiling; but again the move rests upon an understanding of racism, and *racism* in its unmarked form carries the narrow, unspoken meaning attributed to it by the folk theory. More could be done to explicitly redefine racism in institutional and systemic terms. This is an important part of a more general strategy that involves calling into question folk-theoretical assumptions when speakers use those assumptions as the basis for claims. Earlier in excerpt (6), for example, Charles Blow does this when he challenges the either–or binary of the folk theory’s conception of racism.

In the mainstream media discourse shown here, it is no easy task to displace the assumptions of the folk theory with the understanding that racial profiling is part of the wider, systemic operation of racism. The discursive struggle between the folk and critical perspectives can be seen playing out in interactions like those seen in the two excerpts that follow.

- (11) Hannity, Fox 9:00 PM EST, July 17, 2013
Michael Bond, Former NAACP deputy director

Hannity: ... Here with reaction to this and more, professor of Pediatric Neurosurgery, Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Benjamin Carson and the former deputy director of the NAACP Michael Bond. Michael, welcome back. Can you cite...
Bond: How are you doing, Sean?

- Hannity: ... any evidence that there's any racial antipathy in George Zimmerman, his life, his background, this case? The FBI looked in to sixteen months and found nothing. Do you know anything?
- Bond: Well, I don't know anything specific. I don't believe that George Zimmerman is a racist per se, but I do believe that George Zimmerman had prejudices that formed his assumptions about Trayvon Martin.
- Hannity: Do you have any evidence, though?
- Bond: To commit this horrendous act. Well, I think the killing that has taken place of Trayvon Martin is sufficient enough. You know, he was tried—
- Hannity: That has nothing to do— wait, sir. With all due respect, that has nothing to do with race.
- Bond: Well, it does have something to do with race and the assumptions that George Zimmerman made that particular night. George Zimmerman made a gross assumption about Trayvon Martin, that he was in that community up to no good and that predicated his actions. If he had not made those assumptions, he would have never have gotten out of the car, he would have never called the police.
- Hannity: Mr. Bond?
- Bond: And Trayvon Martin would still be alive.
- Hannity: Mr. Bond, you're making assumptions here yourself because what we do know about the case is George Zimmerman, there was a crime ridden neighborhood. Had a lot of break-ins. He was part of a neighborhood watch. He saw somebody he didn't know who lived there and that was very close to a home, seemingly looking in to a window. Now, does that not sound suspicious and transcend the issue of race?

(12) The Ed Show, MSNBC 8:00 PM EST, March 29, 2012

- Schultz: Here's 'The Daily Caller's' Tucker Carlson— was on Fox pushing the Hannity line of attack.
[begin video clip]
- Carlson: For people to weigh in, for professional race baiters, like the ones you just saw on television, for the president himself to weigh in and make this a simple parable about white racism is very foolish, because it may not turn out to bolster that accusation, for one. For another, do you really want to have a conversation about who kills who in this country? Do you want to look at the statistics? I mean, this is not a conversation that we ought to be— that political figures ought to be weighing in on.
[end video clip]
- Schultz: Doctor, what's your response to that?
- Peterson: Mr. Carlson, once again, is kind of way off base here. Remember, he was behind some of the Breitbart crap that we have had to deal with in the past. This to me just smacks of the problem on the whole, is that these folks are engaged in trying to distract us from the mission of pursuing justice for Trayvon Martin.
- The bottom line here is institutional racism is an important thing for us to consider when we look at the ways in which he was profiled by Mr. Zimmerman, in the ways in which the Sanford Police Department historically has operated, and the ways in which the Sanford Police Department handled this particular case.
- We have to ask some of those big questions about institutions. You know what? They can accuse me of being a racist and accuse us of being race baiters as much as they want to. We are still going to pursue the case, pursue justice, and keeping talking about the things that are important for this particular.

In excerpt (11), Sean Hannity of Fox News is talking with former NAACP director Michael Bond. The back-and-forth between them exemplifies the differing assumptions about racism and racial profiling. Whereas Hannity reduces racial profiling to ‘racial antipathy’ and challenges Bond to in effect prove to him that George Zimmerman is a racist, Bond replies, “I don’t believe that George Zimmerman is a racist per se”. Notably, the common operating definition of ‘racist’ that both draw from here is the folk theory’s conception of racists as backward and bigoted individuals.

In excerpt (12) from MSNBC’s *The Ed Show*, a video clip of conservative commentator Tucker Carlson is played by the show’s host, Ed Schultz. In that clip, Carlson summarizes the case as “a simple parable of white racism”, and goes on to note that further evidence “may not turn out to bolster that accusation”. Again, the underlying conception of racism in Carlson’s comments derives from the folk theory’s definition of racism and its fixation on hunting for racists while denying the systemic nature of racism in a racially structured society. According to the assumptions of the folk theory, racism is an ‘accusation’ made of ‘racists’ rather than something everyone needs to confront in themselves.

On the whole, the perspective undergirded by the folk theory works to remove consideration of race from the discussion and minimize racism. As Hannity notes in excerpt (11), Zimmerman’s killing of Martin “has nothing to do with race”. Likewise, in excerpt (12), Carlson views talk of white racism as “foolish”. These moves represent one of the central frames of colorblind racism documented by Bonilla-Silva (2013:77) where the minimization of racism ‘suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances’. In line with the folk theory’s assumptions, the nation is seen to have moved beyond race. Moreover, the only types of racism that are recognized include outward acts of racial bigotry. After all, it is easy to recognize overt hate crimes, like the murder of James Byrd Jr. by white supremacists,³ but more subtle forms of racism that fail to neatly accord with such cases are dismissed as having nothing to do with race.

In excerpt (12), James Peterson, director of Africana Studies and associate professor of English at Lehigh University, reacts to Carlson’s comments by stating: “The bottom line here is institutional racism is an important thing for us to consider when we look at the ways in which he was profiled by Mr. Zimmerman, in the ways in which the Sanford Police Department historically has operated, and the ways in which the Sanford Police Department handled this particular case.” This statement provides a perfect synopsis of the way race and racism has been framed in relation to the Trayvon Martin incident from the critical perspective. At issue are the ways racism impacted how Trayvon Martin was perceived by George Zimmerman—namely, as a criminal suspect in accord with stereotypes that associate young black men with crime—and how the Sanford police affirmed Zimmerman’s suspicion and gave Zimmerman the benefit of the doubt after he killed an unarmed black teenager. In contrast, the folk theory dissolves the racial dimensions from the incident by absolving Zimmerman from being an individual ‘racist’ and fails to

empathize with the concerns of the Martin family and supporters over the historical patterns of injustice that surround the case.

THE FOLK THEORY'S ENTRENCHMENT IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA DISCOURSE

Although responses to Trayvon's shooting across the nation were much more diverse than illustrated in this case study of cable news channels, the entrenchment of the folk theory across these three networks with decidedly different ideological proclivities (in ordinary political terms) illustrates how deep the assumptions of the folk theory run in mainstream thinking. Whereas one might expect the types of reactions seen in the examples from conservative Fox News hosts, even the more liberal leaning CNN hosts draw upon the premises of the folk theory and reproduce the dominant ideology. Only MSNBC stands out for entertaining the most pointed critical challenges to the folk theory, but those challenges mainly come from the guests.

A key difficulty in moving America's conversation about race forward is that focusing on the concrete, overtly racist actions of hate-filled individuals is much easier than understanding the way historical patterns of thought have contributed to a racialized society. Moreover, the format of cable television news, with its short sound bite segments and quick repartees, may lend itself to the easily understood either-or binaries and taken-for-granted assumptions that the folk theory offers. To understand the way subtle forms of racism permeate the social fabric demands critical reflection on the way racism has systemically and institutionally shaped the racial hierarchy. It demands reflecting on the assumptions that operate as unexamined 'common sense' in everyday interactions. Feagin (2006:xii) notes, 'This truth about systemic racism in this society is not easy to communicate to many Americans, especially to most white Americans'. Moreover, it can be difficult to introduce into the generic framework of television news shows that strive to be as entertaining as informative, if not more so.

Moving the conversation about race and racism forward nevertheless requires overcoming many entrenched ideas that have become naturalized as 'common sense' understandings. One of these is that racism is simply something that ignorant people do—and typically do overtly in a way that is easy to recognize so that they can be singled out as 'racists'. As Hill (2008:181; see also, Bonilla-Silva 2013:15) argues, this exercise in hunting for racists is not useful, and functions largely to reproduce the dominant racial ideology. So she urges us 'to move away from thinking of racism as entirely a matter of individual beliefs and psychological states' (Hill 2008:7). In the case of Trayvon's shooting, the emphasis placed on the alleged slur along with trying to brand Zimmerman as either a racist bigot or a humanitarian do-gooder led to a situation where holding Zimmerman accountable for the killing of Trayvon hinged on whether or not he was found to be acting with overt racial animus. This erased from discussion the more critical role race did play in the

incident, from encouraging Zimmerman to see in Trayvon a ‘suspicious’ character that he pursued, to the response of the police, and to the subsequent legal strategy and rulings in the trial that failed to hold Zimmerman accountable for his actions.

As Bonilla-Silva (2013:xv) emphasizes, ‘The more we assume that the problem of racism is limited to the Klan, the Birthers, the Tea Party, or to the Republican Party, the less we understand that racial domination is a *collective* process (we are all in this game)’. To grapple with racism and racial profiling requires breaking down the ingrained prejudices and internalized images that even well-intentioned individuals who claim to reject racism carry around. Such a move can be daunting from the perspective of the folk theory because it challenges everyone, particularly in the dominant white racial group, to confront their own racism in the form of under-examined biases, prejudices, and beliefs. And by ‘racism’, I mean ‘racism’ in the critical sense of the role everyone plays (even if unconsciously) in perpetuating racial stereotypes and furthering the hegemonic structures that contribute to an inequitable society. As Wise (2010:v) argues, ‘Being aware of these biases and alert to their possible triggering gives us all a fighting chance to keep them in check’. He further argues that ignoring these realities of racism ‘makes it more difficult to challenge those biases, and thus increases the likelihood of discrimination’. Ultimately, ignoring the biases that perpetuate a racialized system makes the killing of Trayvon Martin—and Sean Bell before him, and Amadou Diallo before him, and many others before them—possible while absolving the killer of any responsibility whatsoever.

CONCLUSION

Central to the analysis in this article has been an attempt to unravel the ideological underpinnings of the mainstream media’s discourse on race and racism surrounding Trayvon Martin’s shooting. In the beginning of the article I asked: To what extent does the mainstream media’s discourse about race after Trayvon remain embedded in folk ideas and to what extent (if at all) does the conversation move beyond those ideas? The short answer is that, as the dominant racial ideology in US society, the folk theory of race and racism remains a guiding framework in much of the discourse. As critical and minority perspectives attempt to shed light on the twenty-first century versions of racial injustice, those views are refracted through the lens of the folk theory’s obsession with hunting for racists. The effect is to lead the discourse away from an understanding of racism as systemic and institutional to a reduction of racism as something the US once dealt with but no longer needs to concern itself with since it supposedly only remains in the intentions and actions of a few individual bigots. Yet dominant ideological systems always remain partial and open to challenges from oppositional views. To the extent that critical perspectives on race and racism enter into the discourse and challenge the folk theory, there is evidence that the conversation progresses forward in small but important ways. Interestingly, the fact that two of the voices expressing the

critical perspective in the excerpts featured in this article are university professors speaks to the need for scholars to consider the role we can play in making the tools and concepts from scholarship accessible to a wider public audience. After all, social scientific concepts—when fully articulated and understood—can play a role in reshaping folk theories that impede social justice.

NOTES

*An initial version of this article was prepared for a colloquium at the 2014 American Association for Applied Linguistics conference. I am grateful to Sandra Silberstein and James Tollefson for organizing that colloquium and asking me to be a part of it. I also thank Sarah Vieweg, Jenny Cheshire, Angela Reyes, and anonymous reviewers for the invaluable feedback they provided on the manuscript. Any shortcomings that remain are my own.

¹Examples throughout the article represent data as found in the transcripts provided by LexisNexis. The only exception is excerpt (4), which I edited for clarity after watching the video.

²Florida's controversial 'stand your ground' law adds another layer to the discourse surrounding Trayvon's shooting. Critically, any discussion of the 'stand your ground' law must consider the way it differentially impacts minorities in line with the historical patterns of institutional racism discussed here.

³James Byrd, Jr. was an African American who was brutally killed by white supremacists in a racially motivated murder in 1998. The murder spawned the passage of a hate-crimes law in Texas in 2001, and Byrd's name became part of a federal law in 2009 known as the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

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(Received 12 May 2014; revision received 13 August 2014;
accepted 22 September 2014; final revision received 3 October 2014)