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Discourse Society 2011 22: 458

DOI: 10.1177/0957926510395836

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Discourse & Society
22(4) 458–473

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DOI: 10.1177/0957926510395836

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Abstract

This study illustrates how Asian American youth participate in the ongoing formation of linguistic and racial ideologies in the USA through the metapragmatic regimentation of racist discourse (Silverstein, 1993). After presenting examples of crying 'racist' in US politics and entertainment, this article examines ethnographic and discourse data in which Korean American boys 'decode' (Hill, 2009) certain uses of the term 'black' as 'racist'. The analysis illustrates how the regimentation of racist discourse relies on the indexical construal of broader oppositions that link 'black' to negative racialized qualities, including deviance, violence, and insults. This article argues that 'racist' cries by Asian American youth challenge language ideologies of referentialism and personalism and racial ideologies of colorblindness and postrace. Crying 'racist' becomes a rich resource for achieving a number of interactional effects that renegotiate the position of Asian American youth with respect to the range of racial categories that circulate throughout US society.

Keywords

Asian American, colorblind, education, indexicality, media, metapragmatics, politics, postracial, race, racism, youth

Introduction

While there is little argument that race and racism have played integral roles in the history of the USA, there is much debate over their ongoing relevance. With the decline of the more explicit forms of racism that defined slavery and the Jim Crow laws, some have

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argued that we have entered a 'colorblind' ('race is not seen') or 'postracial' ('race is not relevant') age in the post-Civil Rights era, while others contend that contemporary forms of 'new racism' (Barker, 1981) are simply less open and direct. For instance, Bobo et al. (1997) discuss how 'laissez faire racism' relies on a cultural rather than biological deficit model to blame people of color for socioeconomic disparity along racial lines, and Bonilla-Silva (2002) argues how 'colorblind racism' upholds the status quo through a refusal to acknowledge the role of race in systemic inequality. Numerous studies have documented these new forms of covert racism by examining private talk among whites (Myers, 2005), the avoidance of racial labels by muting them (Pollock, 2004) or by substituting euphemisms like 'culture' (Urciuoli, 2009), and linguistic appropriation, such as Mock Spanish and language crossing (e.g. Bucholtz, 1999; Chun, 2001; Hill, 2008; Lo, 1999; Reyes, 2005).

Yet several scholars have also explored the ways in which racist language still occurs in overt ways (e.g. Pagliai, 2009; Van Dijk, 1987). Hill (2008), for example, examines how racial slurs and gaffes made in the public sphere inspire drawn-out debates in a variety of social spaces. These discussions center on speaker intention and word meaning, which are two key components of what Hill calls the 'folk theory of racism'. This theory conceptualizes racism as the project of marginal individuals and a bygone era, as tied to societal outliers who hold on to outdated views. Hill illustrates how when whites accuse other whites of using overtly racist language, they either appeal to the language ideology of personalism to argue that speakers are intentionally racist (as in the case of slurs), or appeal to the language ideology of referentialism to argue that the words that they use are racist (as in the case of gaffes). She argues that these accusations only end up perpetuating the idea that racism is linked to a small minority of backwards individuals, rather than to a contemporary project in which all members of a society are engaged.

In this article, I explore how racist discourse emerges through a configuration of indexical, interactional, and ideological processes, including a range of implicit to explicit forms of linguistic reflexivity (Lucy, 1993). Indeed, as I will show, race is not always the sole or even primary feature of racist discourse, but one of many factors in the reading of racism. Examining ethnographic and discourse data in which Korean American boys 'decode' (Hill, 2009) certain uses of the term 'black' as 'racist', I illustrate how crying 'racist' construes interactional exchanges in relation to broader oppositions that link 'black' to negative racialized qualities, thus reinforcing the black-white US racial paradigm as a naturalized opposition in which 'black' is unfavorably positioned. Yet crying 'racist' does not follow every occurrence of the term 'black'. Instead, Asian American youth systematically interpret as racist only those uses of 'black' that are indexically linked to deviance, violence, and insults. Crying 'racist' also coordinates with local interactional contexts and widespread ideological frameworks to allow Asian American youth to ambiguously combine humor, irony, and contempt in the construction of social relations and in the reformulation of referentialist, personalist, colorblind, and postracial ideologies.

The analysis examines the ways in which two types of metapragmatic regimentation – reflexive calibration and repertive calibration (Silverstein, 1993) – work together in the construal of uses of 'black' as racist. Metapragmatic regimentation refers to the capacity of language to regiment its own pragmatics; to structure and typify itself; to provide coherence to a stretch of communicative activity by segmenting and rendering it as a

socially recognizable event. Discourse can be regimented through both denotationally implicit metapragmatics (e.g. reflexive calibration) and denotationally explicit metapragmatics (e.g. reportive calibration). Taken from the data in this article, an example of implicit metapragmatic activity includes emergent indexical links between the term 'black' and increasing forms of peril, and an example of explicit metapragmatic activity includes a cry of 'racist' after the use of 'black'. Since none of the uses of 'black' (except one) is explicitly connected to racial categorization, readings of racism rely heavily on both forms of metapragmatic regimentation: implicit reflexive calibration through unfolding indexical processes, and explicit reportive calibration when crying 'racist' reports on the semiotic event that it regiments.¹

This article illustrates how Asian American youth participate in the ongoing formation of linguistic and racial ideologies in the USA through the metapragmatic regimentation of racist discourse. I first present examples of crying 'racist' in US politics and entertainment to demonstrate how Asian American youth are part of a larger discursive practice that connects across multiple spatiotemporal scales. I then turn to an analysis of the ethnographic data to explore how 'racist' cries by Asian American youth complicate ideologies of language and race. In terms of language ideologies, crying 'racist' involves neither personalism (i.e. claims about individuals as intentionally racist) nor referentialism (i.e. claims about words as inherently racist). Instead, 'crying racist' emerges by way of indexical signaling that is focused on the context of interaction and not simply racist individuals or words. In terms of racial ideologies, crying 'racist' challenges colorblindness as an ideal individual racial perspective and postrace as an ideal national racial orientation. As such, crying 'racist' becomes a rich resource for achieving a number of interactional effects that renegotiate the position of Asian American youth with respect to the range of racial categories that structure and circulate throughout US society.

Crying 'racist' as a widely circulating practice

Let me first illustrate how crying 'racist' is not limited to the ethnographic data I present in this article, but is a widely circulating practice that can be found in various arenas of American social life. Here, I will briefly discuss five examples in recent years (2005–9) that illustrate how cross-racial racist accusations operate in political commentary and studio entertainment. The first two examples focus on white conservative pundits calling politicians of color 'racist' on a microblogging service and on a television news program. The next three examples center on fictional characters of color crying 'racist' in response to white practices on episodes from three different television comedy series. Similar to the ethnographic data explored later in this article, the following examples rely on the same calibrating device – crying 'racist' – in the metapragmatic regimentation of semiotic activity that is more denotationally implicit than denotationally explicit.

Wise Latinas and stupid cops: Newt Gingrich and Glenn Beck on Sonia Sotomayor and Barack Obama

The first set of examples involves US Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and US President Barack Obama being called 'racist' by Newt Gingrich, former

Republican House Speaker, and Glenn Beck, an American conservative radio and television host, respectively.

On 27 May 2009, Newt Gingrich called Sonia Sotomayor, then Supreme Court Nominee, a 'racist' via Twitter, based on a lecture she delivered in 2001. Calling for a more diversified federal judiciary that can draw on a wide range of experiences and perspectives, Sotomayor said: 'I hope a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experience would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male.' In response, Gingrich wrote: 'Imagine a judicial nominee said "my experience as a white man makes me better than a Latina woman". Wouldn't they have to withdraw? New racism is no better than old racism,' and later: 'White man racist nominee would be forced to withdraw. Latina woman racist should also withdraw.' Yet the following week, Gingrich retracted his remarks by separating apart personalism (i.e. individuals as intentionally racist) from referentialism (i.e. words as inherently racist): 'The word "racist" should not have been applied to Judge Sotomayor as a person, even if her words themselves are unacceptable.'

Although Barker (1981) conceptualizes 'new racism' as contemporary forms of covert racism, Gingrich's 'new racism' seems to be equivalent to circulating models of 'reverse racism', which promote the notion that racism against whites is not only possible but comparable to racism against groups that have endured long histories of discrimination in the USA. Gingrich distinguishes between 'old' and 'new' racism both directionally and temporally: whereas 'old racism' formulates racism against non-whites as a matter of the past, 'new racism' (or reverse racism) formulates racism against whites as a matter of the present.

On 28 July 2009, Glenn Beck called Barack Obama a 'racist' on *Fox & Friends*, a weekday morning program on the Fox News Channel, in response to Obama's remarks at a press conference a week earlier regarding the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Noting the history of racial profiling in the USA, Obama said: 'the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home'. In response, Beck said that Obama is: 'a guy who has a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture,' and later, 'I'm not saying he doesn't like white people, I'm saying he has a problem. This guy is, I believe, a racist.' The hedging here might speak to the way in which the 'new racism' described by Gingrich above is still an emerging concept that runs up against the presupposing weight of 'old racism'. Yet Beck continued to defend his position on his radio program the following day, and during an interview on *CBS Evening News* two months later.

Both racist accusations draw on colorblind and postracial ideologies as ideal orientations, which promote the notion that race does not (and should not) play a role in how people think or act, let alone in how societies are structured. By crying 'racist', Gingrich and Beck deride Sotomayor and Obama for asserting the role that race may play in the interpretation and enforcement of the law, thereby arguing from a standpoint that they themselves are colorblind and postracial while Sotomayor and Obama are not. Although Sotomayor and Obama draw on historical evidence regarding the underrepresentation of women and minorities on the judicial courts and the disproportionate stopping of blacks and Latinos by police officers, these larger ideas are overshadowed by extracted words – 'better conclusion' and 'acted stupidly' – that are interpreted as racist against whites, specifically white males. Gingrich and Beck's critiques result in white

masculinity claiming both victimhood to racist practices and moral righteousness for 'decoding' racist language (Hill, 2009), while minorities are framed as the perpetrators of Gingrich's 'new racism'.

Crying 'racist' in both cases reveals the interplay between linguistic metapragmatics and political pragmatics. Racist accusations metapragmatically regiment segments of discourse as racist, decontextualize these segments from larger and more subtle arguments about race, and package these segments into convenient sound bites that are then recirculated in various media outlets that shape public perception of Sotomayor's nomination and Obama's presidency. This discursive choreography functions to portray minorities as the 'new' racists, and to assert white (male) virtue with claims of being colorblind, postracial, and victims and decoders of racism.

Language, dogs, and art: Tracy Jordan, Wanda Sykes, and Tom Haverford on white practices

These next examples are from three scripted television comedy series in which the characters played by Tracy Morgan and Wanda Sykes, African American actors/comedians, and Aziz Ansari, a South Asian American actor/comedian, cry 'racist' in response to the practices of white characters played by Tina Fey, Larry David, and Doug Jones. Just as in the examples of Gingrich and Beck, crying 'racist' functions to metapragmatically regiment some form of semiotic display, which includes not only language here, but also a dog's behavior and an artist's painting. Yet unlike Gingrich and Beck, these next examples are more similar to the ethnographic data explored later in this article because they center on people of color crying 'racist', and because racist accusations are performed in a more humorous frame.

The first example involves the characters of Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan) and Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) from the NBC comedy series, *30 Rock*. Tracy is the star of a late-night television comedy show of which Liz is the head writer. In an episode that was aired on 16 November 2006, Liz catches Tracy in a lie that he is 'illiterate'. When Liz confronts him, Tracy turns it back on her and says that she has a 'racist mess' because she believed that he could not read and thus subscribes to the 'subtle racism of lowered expectations'. He credits this phrase to Bing Crosby, and after Liz corrects him by attributing it to Bill Cosby, Tracy points his finger at her and says, 'that's racist'.

The next example involves Wanda Sykes and Larry David, who play fictionalized versions of themselves in the HBO comedy series, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. In the show, Wanda is a friend of Larry's wife and often hassles Larry about the things he says and does. In an episode that was aired on 2 October 2005, Wanda meets Larry's new dog, which aggressively barks at her. Larry and his wife are confused because they say that the dog is extremely friendly. Then, when the white repairman in the house enters the room, the dog lovingly approaches him, but when the black repairman soon follows, the dog viciously jumps at him. Wanda says they have a 'racist dog', and asks Larry if he trained it to 'hate black people'.² (It is later revealed that the dog is probably not racist, but homophobic, when it attacks the white comedian Rosie O'Donnell, who is a lesbian like Sykes.)

The final example involves the characters of Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari) and Arnold (Doug Jones) from the NBC comedy series, *Parks and Recreation*. Tom is an employee

of the Parks Department in a small Indiana town. In an episode that was aired on 12 November 2009, Tom and his coworkers are competing in a design contest for the new town mural. Tom commissions a college art student, Arnold, to create his design. Arnold, an abstract expressionist, makes a brightly colored painting filled with nonfigurative shapes that initially disappoints Tom until, over time, he becomes deeply moved by it. Tom continues to pay (and bully) Arnold to create more abstract art for him, but is frustrated that none of the new paintings inspire the same emotions in him. As Arnold takes out another blank canvas, Tom holds one of the paintings and says 'this one's racist', then sneers at Arnold.

The parallels across these three examples suggest the formation of a comedic genre that derives its humor from the recognizability of circulating social types: the nervous yet innocent white liberal and the angry yet imprecise victim of color. All of the white characters are portrayed as anxious and sincere, though some more condescending (Liz) than innocent (Larry, Arnold). All of the characters of color are portrayed as indignant, though some are inexact (Tracy) or mistaken (Wanda) about plausible racist victimhood, while others seem desperate to characterize even the most benign exchanges as racist (Tom). On the one hand, these three examples unsettle the white characters on-screen in order to settle the white viewers off-screen. That is, as the white characters navigate claims of racism that come to be viewed as ridiculous, white viewers are told that claims of racism by people of color should not be taken too seriously. On the other hand, these three examples illustrate that while the characters of color may be imprecise about the exact moments of racism, their eagerness to cry 'racist' may be in response to how these interactions are tainted by the underlying racial anxieties that whites unwittingly exude.

Thus, unlike the examples of Gingrich and Beck, these three examples do not promote colorblind and postracial ideologies as much as they refute them. Each accusation of racism centers on the idea that race is seen and race is relevant even in the most implicit or seemingly innocent cases. To some extent, these three examples portray racism as an ongoing reality, even if only detectable through white anxiety in cross-racial interaction. Yet by exploiting racism in the construction of comedy, these examples also risk mocking racist accusations because they are partly absurd.

What all five examples of crying 'racist' do share is a similar stance toward 'political correctness': that language (and dogs and art) should be monitored in order to minimize offense to others, specifically racial others. Whereas the three characters of color played by Morgan, Sykes, and Ansari insist that white characters need to curb their 'subtle racism', Gingrich and Beck claim that politicians of color must avoid Gingrich's 'new racism' (or reverse racism) by not saying or doing 'racist' things.

Although I have illustrated how racist accusations can be uttered by and about people from different racial backgrounds, it is crucial to note that not all racist cries serve the same purpose. The first two examples, which feature whites directing racist accusations toward non-whites, illustrate one way in which colorblind and postracial ideologies, as well as white virtue and victimhood, are advanced. They distract people from enduring forms of structural racism by conceptualizing 'new racism' as the inability of people of color to 'get past race'. The last three examples show how non-whites directing racist accusations toward whites can refute colorblind and postracial ideologies by maintaining that race is relevant, even in seemingly benign exchanges. As a tool for humor, however,

these racist accusations risk mocking racism and its seriousness. Furthermore, the indirect promotion of white virtue is possible since these examples are taken from scripted shows by white creators, who are partly ‘ventriloquating’ (Bakhtin, 1981/1935) characters of color with clever racial commentary.

Crying ‘racist’ as a locally emergent practice

Now that I have illustrated how cross-racial accusations of racism widely circulate in politics and entertainment, I will turn to data on Asian American youth crying ‘racist’. I collected this data as part of a year-long ethnographic and discourse analytic study at an Asian American cram school in New York City in 2006–7. Taking its name from ‘cramming’ for exams, cram schools are private educational institutions offering additional academic instruction during non-school hours. As opposed to American cram schools, which are commonly understood as temporary supplementary or remedial programs (e.g. Kaplan, Sylvan Learning), Asian American cram schools are primarily modeled along those in Asia, which operate like a parallel educational system, with children continuously attending one or more cram schools from elementary to high school. Asian American cram schools are often established by Asian immigrants and can be found throughout the USA, particularly in Asian American urban enclaves. As a distinctly Korean American cram school or *hagwon*, my research site illustrates the possibilities and perils of racial formation, both in how Korean American ethnic identity is configured, as well as in how racialized ‘others’ – such as blacks, whites, Chinese – are understood.

The discourse excerpts I analyze are from video-recorded classroom interaction among Korean American fifth graders and European American teachers in an English language arts class that met on Fridays after school. Inside and outside the classroom, there were many discussions about race, ethnicity, racism, racial and ethnic difference, and racial and ethnic divisions in schools and neighborhoods. A few boys, who were commonly scolded by the teachers for disruptive behavior, sometimes cried ‘racist!’ (or embedded it in a fake cough) as an aside in ongoing classroom discourse. Although most ‘racist’ cries followed the use of the term ‘black’, some would follow a mention of Iraq or the color ‘peach’, a discussion of the admissions criteria of a competitive academic program, or an ethnic joke, which invariably involved Japanese and Chinese stock characters. This article only considers the ‘racist’ cries that followed uses of ‘black’.

Decoding ‘black’: From referentialism to indexicality

In her article on decoding racist talk, Hill (2009) examines online exchanges following a white journalist’s description of Barack Obama as not only the ‘presumptive’ but ‘presumptuous’ Democratic nominee for the US presidency. Analyzing discussions of ‘presumptuous’ as a code word for the racist word ‘uppity’, Hill argues that decoders only end up placing racism in the past and to the fringes, while positioning themselves as morally righteous. Hill concludes that decoding by whites is not effectively antiracist because it ultimately reasserts white virtue and furthers the folk theory that ties racism to societal outliers with outdated views.

The practices in this article depart a bit from those in Hill. First, I look at people of color decoding racist language, which complicates conceptions of white virtue by inserting Asian Americans into these decoding routines. Second, I conceptualize coded language a little differently. In Hill's use of the term, a person who uses code words is accused of purposefully cloaking a racist message, as cleverly signaling a 'participation framework' (Goffman, 1981) that addresses two distinct audiences: one aware of the hidden racist meaning, and the other oblivious. Acts of decoding thus draw on personalism, which maintains that real meaning resides in the inner states of speakers and not on the surface of their words. In my data, it is clear that language is characterized as coded but it is not clear that speaker intention is.

The discourse excerpts I present all center on Asian American youth decoding certain uses of the term 'black' as 'racist'. Around the mid-20th century, several black scholars and activists began writing about how the English language has white racism to blame for disproportionately associating calamity with terms for 'black' and not 'white': for example, 'blackball', 'blackmail', 'blacklist', and so on (Davis, 1969; Podair, 1956). This argument was challenged by pointing out that the color of objects inspired many of these names and that similar terms have existed in African languages before whites were encountered (Bosmajian, 1969). This debate over the history of words and their baptismal meanings reflects a common view of language that operates within the referentialist ideology. Referentialism sees word meaning as fixed in some historical past rather than emergent through interactional practice. It suggests that to eliminate racist worlds, language users need to eradicate racist words, much like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) tried to do with its symbolic funeral for the 'N Word' in 2007. In this view, racist language is too easily framed as overtly marked relics of the past rather than a complex modern-day project.

The following excerpts illustrate how the use of the term 'black' is decoded as racist, not through a compliance with referentialist ideology but through the interpretation of indexical practices. That is, not by viewing the term 'black' as inherently racist but by attending to the ways in which 'black' becomes indexically linked to negative qualities. In this first interaction, the teacher and students are discussing the Columbine shooting as a sample topic for their essay on gun control.

(1) 9 February 2007, 4.13 pm³

- 001 Ms Turner: these were not your (2.0) typical high school students, s- th- the rest of
 002 the students at school were not like that. it was this isolated group that
 003 unfortunately turned on their own, yes. ((calling on Dan whose hand is
 004 raised))
 005 Dan: maybe it was like- like jealousy
 006 Ms Turner: well whatever the case they were fr- members of a group, i- it was very
 007 much like the gothic- groups, that wear the black clothes and the-
 008 y'know- the- the black makeup and-
 009 Ike: Men in Black ((several students laugh))
 010 Chul: racism
 011 Ms Turner: th- the point is these kids got a hold of their parents' guns, now out west,
 012 where you can easily get a gun like this, and shop at a local Walmart

In the description of deviant students – ‘not ... typical’, ‘isolated’, ‘turn on their own’, ‘jealous’, ‘gothic’ – the term ‘black’ is used twice in the description of their appearance (clothes and makeup), followed by Ike referencing the title of a Hollywood movie *Men in Black*, which provokes laughter. Chul then cries ‘racism’ within this humorous frame. This accusation is not expanded upon, yet it serves as a segue from descriptions of things black to ‘the point’ about gun control for their essay.

Something similar happens in this next excerpt in which the teacher is trying to get the class in order after the break.

(2) 8 December 2006, 5.40 pm

- 020 Mr Bader: I- I definitely want to- s- send somebody to the office to quiet this crowd
 021 down, so, if- I see any twitches, or any, b- b- uh- defiant behavior, I will-
 022 Hyo: send you to the office (just say it)
 023 Mr Bader: take you to the office personally
 024 Hyo: no I will bring the hammer down
 025 Mr Bader: bring the hammer,
 026 Luke: not- not bring-
 027 Mr Bader: the hammer of Thor right coming down
 028 Luke: no not the hammer of Thor, the sword of- the sword of light
 029 Mr Bader: da- da- Damo- Diocles Diocl-
 030 Luke: no the- no the sword of darkness
 031 Mr Bader: the sword of darkness is coming to those who act in a, in antisocial
 032 behavior
 033 Joo-eun: does that mean the sword is dark? [or does that mean-
 034 Pete: [you wish you were a little boy again
 035 (don't you)
 036 Joo-eun: does that mean the blade is black?
 037 Mr Bader: yes, this is black, this is- this is- carbon-
 038 Pete: racist! ((embedded in a cough))
 039 Mr Bader: carbon- plated- steel. now, excuse me skateboard people, we are
 040 recognizing the order of events or steps on page eleven

In this excerpt, participants describe the violence that will ensue upon ‘defiant’ or ‘antisocial’ students. Drawing on Germanic mythology and possibly the legends of Damocles or Diocles, the emergent poetic patterning reveals an escalation by increment of the brutality of the weapon: from hammer to Thor’s hammer to light sword to dark sword to black sword. In so doing, the object itself becomes darker, supporting the movement from ‘light’ to ‘dark’ as a naturalized opposition that unfavorably positions darkness. After Joo-eun and the teacher discuss the color of the sword as ‘black’, Pete interjects ‘racist’ in the middle of a cough. In Pete’s prior turn, he teases Mr Bader for being nostalgic for his adolescence, thus Pete’s accusation of racism may serve to continue or even heighten playful teasing. And, again, as in the previous excerpt, this accusation is not expanded upon, but serves as a segue from things black to the content of the class. In fact, it effectively ends the threats of violence and shifts the topic from impending punishment to the lesson at hand, initiated by a ‘now’.

In this next excerpt, the students are doing a crossword puzzle and asking the teacher for help.

(3) 15 June 2007, 4.19 pm

- 050 Dan: what's number thirteen? it e- ends- it begins-
 051 Ms Turner: dark or black ((reading the clue))
 052 Dan: it begins with a 'e' and ends with a 'y'
 053 Ms Turner: thirteen down, I'll try and find that. (4.0) okay, it's- okay it's not- it-it
 054 means black, (2.0) think about the piano keys, white keys and the black
 055 keys are also called
 056 Bill: (called) racist, (they're) separated
 057 Chul: that's not racist
 058 Bill: they're separated
 059 Chul: so? [that's a segregation, (1.0) it's not racist
 060 Ms Turner: [ebony
 061 ((Bill looks down and doesn't respond to Chul; students continuing their
 062 separate conversations))

As the teacher utters 'black' three times with regard to the crossword clue, she constructs an opposition between 'black' and 'white' piano keys. Bill then cries 'racist' followed by a justification 'separated'. Chul challenges him by asserting that it's 'not racist' but 'segregation'. Unlike the previous excerpts in which racist accusations occur in a more explicit humorous or teasing frame, the charge of racism here becomes the impetus for a verbal spat. Yet, as in the previous excerpts, discussing racism serves as a segue back to the task at hand, as the teacher provides the crossword puzzle answer: 'ebony'.

As a readily available way to talk about the relationship between black and white, the use of 'segregation' further supports the naturalized opposition of these two color terms – as well as the racialized groups they are emblematic of – with a word most commonly associated with Jim Crow era discriminatory practices. In previous excerpts, racist accusations went uncontested as 'black' was indexically linked to deviance and violence, but here the calibration is challenged when the indexical link to negative qualities is less robust and is situated in the historical past. The terms black and white are indeed linked to the separation of racialized groups, but not to more elevated forms of immediate physical danger (guns and swords in excerpts 1 and 2). This leads to a more vulnerable reading of racism.

Racism and segregation go hand in hand once again in the next excerpt in which the students are supposed to be quietly working on an assignment. Lucy repeatedly turns behind her to see what Chul and Mark are doing.

(4) 18 May 2007, 6.28 pm

- 070 Chul: oh we're on page five
 071 Lucy: good for you
 072 Chul: heh heh heh
 073 Lucy: nerds
 074 Mark: you're a nerd
 075 Chul: [yeah

- 076 Lucy: [yeah
 077 Bill: you're white and nerdy
 078 Pete: oh::
 079 Mark: oh:: ((leaning into Lucy))
 080 Chul: oh:: ((leaning into Lucy))
 081 Pete: [oh::
 082 Lucy: [you're black and nerdy ((Chul eyes, mouth widen, looks to Bill and Pete;
 083 Mark looks to Dan, laughs))
 084 Bill: oh::::
 085 Chul: oh::: racist! racist!
 086 Mark: segregation! (2.0)
 087 Ms Turner: are we ready to go over this
 088 Joo-eun: no::
 089 Dan: five more minutes

Whereas in the previous excerpts the use of 'black' was ostensibly used in the description of objects (clothing, makeup, swords, piano keys), the use of color terms here coincides more directly with the description of racialized human types. Escalating the insult 'nerd' by calling Lucy 'white and nerdy', Bill is most likely referencing the title of Weird Al Yankovic's 2006 hit parody, 'White & Nerdy', of the song 'Ridin', by Chamillionaire (several boys frequently sang this in the classroom). At the same time, Bill's use of the color term 'white' not only conforms to circulating ideologies that link nerdiness to whiteness (Bucholtz, 2001), but also initiates a frame in which 'white' and 'black' emerge as offensive racial assignments, leaving 'Asian' or 'Korean' as unmarked racial categories. Just as 'light' to 'dark' in the description of the sword was produced through the naturalization of these oppositions as well as an increase in harm, so too is 'white' to 'black' but with a more explicit racializing force. Lucy's use of the term 'black' is followed by increased expressions of shock, signaling an even further escalation of the insult. And cries of 'racist' and 'segregation' soon follow, continuing the one-upmanship of insults within a frame of performance that is both alarming and amusing. And, again, as with the previous excerpts, this charge of racism serves as a segue back to the classroom task at hand: 'are we ready to go over this?'

Lest I leave you with the wrong impression, the following excerpt illustrates how not all uses of 'black' get marked as racist. In this final excerpt, the students are supposed to be working on their assignment, but Pete starts talking about Lucy's hair.

(5) 11 May 2007, 6.35 pm

- 090 Pete: Lucy got a perm ((Lucy laughs))
 091 Chul: what?
 092 Pete: her hair
 093 Ms Turner: you jealous? you want one too? ((laughs))
 094 Joo-eun: he doesn't have that [much hair
 095 Chul: [he can't afford it, he can't afford it
 096 Ms Turner: actually they could give him a short perm ((laughs))
 097 Pete: my hair is (1.0) natural black
 098 Lucy: no you sold your hair so you could earn money ((laughs))

- 099 Pete: this isn't hair, this is a wig ((Chul laughs))
 100 Ms Turner: did you dye your hair black?
 101 Pete: no, it was white before ((Lucy laughs))
 102 Ms Turner: you dyed it so it was shoe polish, is that shoe [polish black
 103 Chul: [I'm on fire man! you
 104 people are all on- ice
 105 Ms Turner: he took shoe polish- ((laughs))
 106 Chul: I'm on fire!
 107 Ms Turner: it's not as black as yours ((to Chul))

Here, the term 'black' is mentioned four times, and is positioned against 'white' like many of the previous excerpts. Yet mention of the word 'black', let alone 'shoe polish', which is associated with black-face minstrelsy popular in 19th-century USA, does not invite a racist accusation. Instead of always or randomly crying 'racist' in response to any occurrence of the term 'black', Asian American youth systematically interpret only particular uses of 'black' as racist: those that are recognized as indexically linked to negative racialized qualities.

Indexicality, interaction, and ideology

In these interactions with Asian American youth, the metapragmatic regimentation of racist discourse occurs in a complex interplay with indexical, interactional, and ideological processes: from how reflexive calibration indexically links certain uses of the term 'black' to negative racialized qualities; to how reportive calibration segments and typifies preceding discourse as 'racist'; to how identities and relationships are interactionally accomplished in the local classroom context; to how widely circulating linguistic and racial ideologies connect to discursive practice. Separating out two types of metapragmatic regimentation provides analytic clarity: reflexive calibration uncovers the intricate indexical patterns that produce implicit meanings, and reportive calibration reveals how participants themselves explicitly identify racist discourse.

Guided by indexical processes in the reflexive and reportive calibration of racist discourse, these regimentations largely reinforce the black–white racial paradigm in the USA in several ways. First, terms for black and white are recirculated as naturalized oppositions (light sword vs black sword; white keys vs black keys; white and nerdy vs black and nerdy). Second, black is often unfavorably positioned within these oppositions, used to escalate physical violence (sword) or verbal abuse (nerdy). Third, black and white terms for objects (clothing, makeup, swords, piano keys) get mapped onto persons and become emblematic of discrete racialized positionings. At the same time, the black–white binary system is partly disrupted through the insertion of Asian American actors into these interactional routines. While 'black' emerges as a more salient emblem of a racialized position than 'white', 'Asian' becomes an unmarked racial category. And Asian American youth contribute to the assertion that race and racism remain culturally significant, even if by commenting on a paradigm in which they are absent.

Local interactional and contextual factors also play a central role in these regimentations. Largely emerging as a gendered practice, only boys with reputations for disruptive behavior cry 'racist' in a humorous frame that blurs the lines between playful, ironic, and

snide. For example, crying 'racist' escalates teasing (after 'wish you were a boy again'), initiates verbal sparring (after 'white and black keys'), steps up insults (after 'black and nerdy'), and controls the teachers, who never fail to evade the topic of racism by quickly returning to the classroom task at hand. Teacher avoidance may be aided by how racist cries are performed as asides or offhand remarks, making the accusations easier to ignore than to take seriously because they are framed as 'light talk' (Hill, 2008: 108), or because the topic of racism is too complicated or uncomfortable to address from the perspective of white teachers. Students, then, are given complete freedom to cry 'racist' without fear of teacher censure, allowing racist accusations to be a fully unrestrained resource for Asian American boys to create identities and relationships that ambiguously combine humorous, provocative, and caustic elements.

In addition, these regimentations mark a shift away from the folk theory of racism by complicating language ideologies that rely on referentialism and personalism. Racist accusations respond to the term 'black' not with respect to word meaning, but with respect to indexical processes that link 'black' to deviance, violence, and insults. When 'black' is less rigidly linked to peril, as when it describes the separation of piano keys, the reportive calibration is more likely challenged. And when 'black' is not linked to peril, as when it describes the color of hair, it does not invite a racist accusation at all. Also, racist accusations do not engage in debates over intention; instead, they typically shift the discourse back to classroom business. This is partly due to the construction of racist discourse as a collective practice. For example, both the teacher and students describe the black apparel and the black sword; even the 'black and nerdy' comment was collaborative, given that Bill's introduction of 'white' in 'white and nerdy' set the frame in which its naturalized opposition, 'black', would follow. In these regimentations, racist language is certainly treated as coded, but specific individuals are not accused of concealing racist intent because they emerge as part of a larger collective body.

Finally, these regimentations contribute to the ongoing formation of widely circulating racial ideologies. Colorblindness, postrace, and political correctness – as ideologies whose emergence began in the late 20th century – have transformed how race is understood and discussed in the USA. If political correctness requires individuals to monitor the language they and others use so that it is sanitized of any racially offensive content, a colorblind or postracial society might be understood as the reward at the end of this awkward adolescence. Yet these ideologies are not fixed; they are constantly reshaped through discursive processes across spatiotemporal scales in the service of social and political agendas. For instance, colorblindness can be harnessed in the service of contemporary racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2002), and political correctness can be obeyed as much as derided for the supposed burden and insincerity that results from altering one's language. This indeterminacy of racial ideologies enables Korean American boys to cry 'racist' quite easily in the policing of language, whether to uphold these ideologies or to mock them. The benefits of exploiting these ideologies are noticeable in this classroom: individuals who cry 'racist' can assert superiority for being able to decode racism (even if playfully so), and can remain ambiguous about where they stand relative to these ideologies since race and racism are not supposed to be – and, in fact, in this classroom, are not – discussed at length.

Conclusion

While the metapragmatic regimentation of racist discourse in the USA can be found in a wide range of social spaces (e.g. political commentary, studio entertainment, classroom interaction), crying 'racist' across various contexts can serve varying interests. The data on non-white fictional characters crying 'racist' in television comedy series and the data on Asian American youth crying 'racist' in the classroom both operate within a comedic genre that relies on circulating social types: the nervous yet innocent white liberal (white characters and white teachers) and the angry yet imprecise person of color (non-white characters and non-white students). These fictional characters of color and Asian American youth do not conform to colorblind or postracial ideologies because they do indeed see race and its ongoing relevance, even if only by detecting the underlying white anxiety that contaminates seemingly benign cross-racial encounters. While both sets of data contribute to the constant circulation of race in everyday language and contemporary life, the humorous interactional frames and ambiguous racial content produce an uncertainty about whether interactants are partly exploiting or even mocking racist accusations for comedic or other social effects. Unlike the white conservative pundits crying 'racist' in the advancement of white integrity and victimhood, the Asian American youth do not claim that colorblindness, postrace, and reverse racism are realities, nor do they rely on the construction of racism as a matter of the individual. All examples do, however, rely on political correctness. Semiotic displays with readable 'racist' content – no matter how implicit, innocent, or fictional – can be exploited for all kinds of social effects: from promoting white virtue; to solidifying a comedic genre; to either endorsing or refuting the concept of a postracial society. By commenting on the black–white US racial paradigm in which they are absent, Asian American youth renegotiate their position relative to dominant racial categories by mobilizing a paradigm that shapes both local classroom identities and widespread racial ideologies.

Crying 'racist' is not a discrete act but a discursive chain that connects across multiple domains (Agha and Wortham, 2005): from temporal scales of months or years in a school to spatial scales across classrooms, politics, and entertainment. The diverse levels at which crying 'racist' occurs contribute to the ongoing formation of racial ideologies to varying degrees. Whereas political and entertainment media reach national audiences that yearn to be postracial (whether from the perspective of conservative colorblindness or liberal 'diversity'), Korean American boys reach teachers and classmates to ostensibly refute postracial ideology in the execution of interactional effects, illustrating how race gets entangled with a wide range of social factors, including gender, humor, teasing, and classroom management. The metapragmatic regimentation of racist discourse by Asian American youth complicates both linguistic and racial ideologies by relying more on indexicality than ideologies of personalism or referentialism, and by complicating colorblindness as an ideal individual racial perspective and postrace as an ideal national racial orientation. Crying 'racist' in classrooms (as well as in politics and entertainment) continually reshapes the development and movement of racial ideologies, so that what it means to be colorblind, postracial, or politically correct is in constant flux.

Notes

This work was supported by a National Academy of Education/Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship and a Woodrow Wilson Career Enhancement Fellowship. I thank H. Samy Alim, Elaine Chun, Adrienne Lo, Valentina Pagliai, and Jonathan Rosa for their insightful comments on earlier drafts.

1. The third form of calibration in the Silversteinian framework, nomic calibration, seems to also be at work in signaling the inhabitation of a world systematically structured by race.
2. This storyline is not unlike Romain Gary's novel, *White Dog* (1970), and Samuel Fuller's 1982 film adaptation, in which a dog has been programmed to violently attack black people. Such depictions connect to the pre-Civil Rights US history of the use of dogs in the policing of African Americans.
3. All names are pseudonyms. Transcription conventions are as follows:

.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
,	falling–rising intonation
!	increased volume
-	abrupt break or stop
:	sound elongation
[overlapping talk
(1.0)	pause timed to seconds
(word)	unsure transcription
((word))	transcriber comment

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