

Of Witches and White Folks*

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Abstract

A central debate in philosophy of race is between eliminativists and conservationists about what we ought do with ‘race’ talk. ‘Eliminativism’ is often defined such that it’s committed to holding that (a) ‘race’ is vacuous and races don’t exist, so (b) we should eliminate the term ‘race’ from our vocabulary. As a stipulative definition, that’s fine. But as an account of one of the main theoretical options in the debate, it’s a serious mistake. I offer three arguments for why eliminativism should not be tethered to vacuity or error theory, and three arguments for why the view shouldn’t be understood in terms of eliminating the term ‘race’ from our vocabulary. Instead, I propose we understand the debate as concerning whether certain uses of ordinary race terms are typically wrong. This proposal is quite simple, and naturally suggested by the common gloss that eliminativism about ‘race’ is akin to a commonsensical view about ‘witch’ talk. But nonetheless, I should that it offers a significant recharacterization of this core debate in philosophy of race.

A central issue in philosophy of race concerns the question, ‘What ought we do with ‘race’ talk?’ (Mallon 2006: 526). The two main camps in this debate are *eliminativists* and *conservationists*. Eliminativism was prominently defended by Zack (1993) and Appiah (1996), but conservationism is now dominant, defended by, e.g., Hardimon (2017).

What’s at issue here? One standard gloss of the debate is that it concerns whether ‘race’ talk is analogous to ‘witch’ talk. Consider:

*For their helpful comments, I owe thanks to Robin Dembroff, David Faraci, Daniel Fogal, Adam Hochman, Chris Howard, Zoe Johnson-King, Alex King, Meena Krishnamurthy, Stephanie Leary, Tristram McPherson, Ian Peebles, David Plunkett, Keshav Singh, Alex Worsnip, several anonymous referees, and audiences at MIT, the University of Michigan, Queen’s University, Washington University in St Louis, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Minnesota.

- (1) Hillary is a witch.
- (2) Barack is Black.

I'll take ordinary uses of (2) to be paradigm examples of 'race' talk. (I'll discuss how to home in on this category in §I.) So on the gloss above, eliminativism says (1) is analogous to (2), but conservatism denies this.

But there are two ways of construing the analogy between (1) and (2). The first focuses on the idea that 'witch' has a semantic property: it's *vacuous*, which is to say it fails to refer.¹ So (1) is false. Since it is false, we shouldn't assert it. And this will be the case for 'witch' talk systematically: there are no witches, so we should not assert any sentences like (1). The analogous view is: racial terms like 'Black' are vacuous, so sentences like (2) are all false, and so we should not engage in ordinary 'race' talk.

This way of thinking about the debate dominates the literature. Racial terms have been continuously compared to non-referring terms like 'phlogiston', 'Zeus', and 'Santa Claus': see Montagu (1964: xii), Glasgow (2009: 2, 129), Zack (2002: 181), Mills (2014: 93), and Appiah (2018: 118). 'Eliminativism' is often defined as the view that "'race" as a term [does] not refer, so we should eliminate it from our vocabulary' (Mills 2014: 89).

The alternative way of construing the analogy focuses on how *uses* of 'witch' in assertions like (1) have a moral property: they're wrong. Eliminativism, then, would hold that uses of racial terms in assertions like (2) are similarly wrong, whereas conservatism would deny this.

This alternative way of thinking about the analogy has two important features. First, it doesn't say anything about whether the word 'witch' is vacuous. It might be wrong to assert (1) because there are no witches. But on some plausible approaches to semantics, 'witch' will refer—perhaps to people regarded as having magical powers,² rather than people who have magical powers. On such approaches, (1) may be true. But even if that is the case, *it may still be wrong to assert (1)*: true assertions can have invidious perlocutionary effects, and uses of 'witch' have long been implicated in everything from murder to marginalization. Notice that such moral concerns about uses of 'witch' do not arise for uses of humdrum vacuous terms: uses of 'phlogiston' or 'Santa Claus' are morally innocuous.

Second, it focuses on *uses* of 'witch', not the word itself. While we can ascribe *vacuity* to 'witch', we ascribe *wrongness* to uses of 'witch'. More precisely, we ascribe it to *certain uses* of 'witch', but not others. Consider:

- (3) Hillary is believed to be a witch.

Plausibly, it's fine to assert (3), but not (1). If so, our moral concerns lie not with the word 'witch' itself; it needn't be eliminated from our vocabulary.

My main goal is to argue that we should adopt this way of construing the analogy as a way to gloss the debate that's central to philosophy of race. More precisely, the two key points I'll defend are that eliminativism should be understood as non-committal with respect to whether 'race' is vacuous and whether races exist; and that what's at issue in the debate between eliminativism and conservatism is not a question about racial terms themselves, but whether certain uses of racial terms are wrong. So I'll use 'eliminativism' to pick out a family of views on which it is typically wrong to engage in

¹This is how the term 'vacuity' is typically used in this literature. See e.g. Haslanger (2005: 10): 'race eliminativists maintain that talk of races is vacuous (no one is white or Black, Asian or Latino, because there are no races)'.

²Some dictionaries define 'witch' this way. See also Hochman (2020: 7).

ordinary ‘race’ talk such as asserting (2);³ this does not entail error theory or eliminating terms from our vocabulary. As I’ll emphasize, though, my concern is not how we define ‘eliminativism’; it’s how we construe the relevant theoretical options in the debate.

Here’s the agenda. In §II, I’ll discuss why eliminativism should not be tethered to vacuity and error theory. Some have also held this view: Hochman claims ‘eliminativists about race urge us to eliminate race from our speech, thoughts, and practices regardless of our metaphysical position on race’ (2017a: 67); and Ludwig claims we can ‘have a meaningful debate about the elimination of races without addressing the question whether *race* fails to refer’ (2013: 9). But I go further by offering three arguments for the view expressed in these passing comments. The most important of these connects this debate in philosophy of race to debates in social and political philosophy of language, where moral concerns about uses of slurs and generics aren’t predicated on vacuity.

In §III, I’ll offer three arguments for why the debate should be focused on whether certain uses of racial terms are wrong, rather than the vague claim that ‘racial terms should be eliminated from our vocabulary’. Here my key position is close to the view that the debate about ‘race’ should be normative, not semantic or metaphysical.⁴ But my concerns are different from others who’ve pushed this view; and moreover, I go further in arguing that the normative debate must be about *uses* of ‘race’, and showing why this matters. Among other things, it opens up alternatives to the path eliminativists have taken in *replacing* or *reconstructing* ‘race’ talk. I’ll close (§IV) by noting that the combined effect of these two points pushes for a significant recharacterization of the debate about ‘race’.

I | WHAT IS ORDINARY ‘RACE’ TALK?

That’s where we’re headed. But before we get there, we need to know more about the phenomenon in question. If the debate concerns what we ought to do with ordinary ‘race’ talk’, what is ordinary ‘race’ talk?

This can be a thorny issue. Consider Mallon (2006), who similarly held that the debate over ‘race’ should be normative, not semantic or metaphysical. Here’s Mallon’s core concern. First, eliminativists and conservationists broadly agree about ‘the metaphysical facts surrounding racial or racialized phenomena’, but adopt different semantic approaches for racial terms, yielding different conclusions about whether racial terms refer. Second, the debate should not ‘rely on finding the correct theory of reference to determine the appropriate use of ‘race’ talk’; to do so is to make the debate ‘hostage to issues in the philosophy of language and metaphysics about which there is little agreement’ (2006: 528, 548).

A problem for Mallon’s approach is that many participants in debate—Glasgow (2009), Hardimon (2017)—*define* the category of ‘race’ talk via semantic commitments. How could we have this normative disagreement without resolving those disagreements in philosophy of language?⁵

³I saw a family because many more precise views fit under this umbrella. See e.g. Mallon’s (2006: 526, fn. 7) ‘finer distinctions’ between forms of eliminativism. Such finer distinctions either aren’t relevant here or would simply bog us down too much.

⁴Mallon (2006) held this view, but was not the first to do so. For instance, Outlaw (1996: 33) noted that given the role of ‘race’ talk in sustaining forms of racial supremacy, the focus of the debate should be broader than whether ‘race’ is vacuous. For discussions of Mallon and related views, see Glasgow (2009: 11–19) and Hochman (2017b).

⁵Haslanger (2019a: 10) discusses this problem for Mallon at greater length.

My points differ from Mallon's core concern. But it'd still be unfortunate for my purposes if we could only have a clear target for the debate if we first agreed on a semantics for 'race' talk. How can we proceed instead?

First, we can proceed *via ostension*. I won't enumerate a long list of paradigm examples, but here's a recipe for doing so. Start with a set of the relevant predicates (e.g., 'is Black'), then build out the plethora of speech acts that use it: racial ascriptions like (2), generalizations like 'Blacks are good at basketball', attitude ascriptions like 'Barack is perceived to be Black', questions like 'Is Barack Black?', and so on and so forth.

Second, we can precisify and unify the list *functionally*,⁶ following Spencer:

[A] *race talk* is a discourse that uses 'race' (or a synonym) to classify people into subgroups, [and] the subgroups picked out in a race talk are *races* and the names of races are *race terms* (2019: 78).

Spencer's functional profile is intended to be thin. Arguably, it's too thin;⁷ but if so, we can add to it. (Perhaps using Taylor's (2013: 16-18) view that the classifications are 'a way of assigning generic meaning to human bodies and bloodlines'.) The goal will be to build up a sufficiently specific functional profile that picks out the relevant set of uses of 'race' without settling anything contentious about the semantics of the term.

It's important to clarify that, for my purposes, we do not need this approach to yield a list of *race terms*. We need it to yield a list of *terms used racially*; i.e., we're concerned with *uses* of terms that have this function. This matters a great deal for how we think about scope of my project.

Consider, for example, terms like 'Jew' or 'Muslim'. You might think these are not racial terms, because they are religious terms. But it's hard to deny that some uses of 'Jew' have functioned as paradigmatic uses of 'race' talk:

In fifteenth-century Spain, Jews and Moors were understood as major biological groups and lineages. They were even labeled as "razas." According to the purity of blood statutes, their identities were not considered alterable through conversion: they were thought to be "in the blood" (Hochman 2019: 1249).

And some continue to use 'Jew' racially.⁸ Likewise, 'Muslim' has arguably 'acquired meaning beyond religion and now also describes a racial category' (Gotanda, cited by Hochman 2019: 1248). Similarly, terms for ethnicities and nationalities can be sometimes *used* as race terms.⁹

⁶In case this isn't obvious, something like this second step is required because if we just looked at the orthographic and phonetic sequence, that would be both too broad *and* too narrow. Glasgow points this out (2007: 171): eliminativists are 'willing to speak of a human "race" or a foot "race," and they would not be satisfied if we replaced our word "race" in this context with, say, "schmace," to cover the exact same ideas.'

⁷For related discussion, see Hochman on 'the specificity problem' (2020: 6), and cf. Spencer (2014, 2015, 2018, 2019a, 2019b).

⁸The complications faced by contemporary 'Jews of Color' (see Benor 2016) are arguably traceable to a common practice of using 'Jew' racially. There are also defenses of the view that—on social constructionist approaches to race—Jews are a race (Kaplan 2003).

⁹On the debated boundaries between 'ethnicity' and 'race' talk, see Corlett (2003: ch. 1). For examples of how ethnic and national terms are used as race terms, see Wilson (1903).

Conversely, it may be possible to assert (2) without using ‘Black’ racially. This relates to the complex question of how *reconstructionism* fits into the debate about ‘race’.¹⁰ I’ll discuss this view more in §III and IV, but for now, I’ll just describe a commitment of a plausible form of reconstructionism: While ‘Barack is Black’ standardly communicates the same thing as ‘Barack is a member of the Black race’, we could assert (2) to communicate the same thing as ‘Barack is a member of the group racialized as Black’.¹¹ For my purposes here, what matters is that *if* this view is true, then some uses of ‘Black’ in assertions like (2) fall outside the ambit of ‘race’ talk. (I won’t always mention this caveat in discussing (2), for the sake of brevity.)

Hopefully that’s enough to clarify the target of the debate for now. But I want to emphasize three methodological points and limitations.

First, for the sake of brevity, I’ve said little about the *context* of assertions like (2). But context matters. The audience, the speaker, and their purpose can make a difference to what we communicate and how it is morally evaluated. I’ll address this in §III, especially *apropos* the goals of anti-racism and intra-group solidarity. For now, bear with me.

Second, eliminativists and conservationists often disagree about the word ‘race’ *and* the concept RACE. Many discussions focus most on the concept, but I’ll focus on the term. This is mostly for brevity. Tackling the issues about uses of ‘race’ is complex enough. Tackling concepts too would be unwieldy. Indeed, uses of RACE raise two additional complications. One, concepts can be a moving target. Most philosophers think concepts are mental items that are constituents of beliefs and thoughts. But ‘for many philosophers, concepts could not be mental items’;¹² that is, most philosophical accounts of concepts arguably make them ineligible to play such psychological roles. Two, if concepts are mental items, the moral question would be when uses of RACE in beliefs and thoughts are wrong. But the ethics of believing and asserting (2) may differ quite dramatically, and the ethics of belief is far more fraught with controversy.¹³ So I focus on the debate about uses of ‘race’ *talk*, and largely set aside RACE *thought*.

Finally, despite noting that ‘race’ talk can plausibly involve a range of speech acts, for now I’ll stick to simple assertions like (2). Ethical questions about non-assertoric speech acts have been neglected in the debate. I’ll explain why, and briefly address this, when I conclude in §IV.

II | DIVORCING ELIMINATIVISM FROM ERROR THEORY

In this section I’ll offer three arguments for why eliminativism about ‘race’ should be divorced from vacuity and error theory. This is not to say that eliminativists must be realists. It’s to say they can be non-committal.

This is a significant departure from prominent contemporary definitions of ‘eliminativism’. Hardimon, for example, treats eliminativism as his main target in *Rethinking Race*, and defines the view as follows:

¹⁰Some treat it as a third view: a competitor to both eliminativism and conservationism. When I first wrote this article, I viewed reconstructionism as a form of conservationism. But a referee persuaded me that many reconstructionists are eliminativists. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pushing me more on how reconstructionism fits in here.

¹¹Cf. Hochman (2020: 8): ‘reconstructionism [...] is not committed to the view that *Black people* do not exist, only to the view that Black people do not constitute a “race.”’

¹²Leslie and Johnson (2012: 113).

¹³The minority view is that beliefs can wrong; for a defense, see Basu (2019).

- (i) The word ‘race’ and the concept race as applied to human beings should be eliminated from our vocabulary.
- (ii) The biological category or kind race as applied to human beings should be eliminated from our ontology (2017: 3).

Part (ii) of Hardimon’s definition of ‘eliminativism’ tethers the view to error theory. Mills did the same above. As do most current definitions:¹⁴

Eliminativism about race [is the view that]: There are no races. Racial attributions are false. The case of race is analogous to that of witch-hood. There are no witches and witch accusations are false. Race is neither biologically real nor socially real (Ney and Hazlett 2014: 266).

Eliminativism argues that race should be eliminated from discourse, because all racial discourse is biological and race has no biological bases (Gracia and Smith 2018: 205).

An eliminativist is a racial skeptic for whom race-talk is at best an egregious error, and at worst a pernicious lie. Not surprisingly, adherents to this perspective usually insist that we strike – that is, eliminate – race from our ontological vocabularies (Taylor 2013: 90).

There are some general and specific reasons why eliminativism continues to be defined in ways that commit the view to vacuity and error theory. First, ‘eliminativism’ and ‘error theory’ have sometimes been used as interchangeable technical terms in philosophy writ large. Some in philosophy of race explicitly treat them as such: Haslanger, for example, writes that ‘social constructionists are often at odds with *error theorists* (sometimes called *eliminativists*)’ (2012: 382). So even when some (like Mallon) emphasize that the debate between eliminativists and conservationists is normative, it is understandable that many take eliminativism to be a normative *and* metaphysical view.

Second, philosophers who are eliminativists have been error theorists.¹⁵ And this is no accident. They are eliminativists about ‘race’ *because* they are error theorists about race. All versions of the main argument for eliminativism (which I paraphrased at the start, and discuss below) use error theory as a key premise. Eliminativists’ subsidiary arguments typically presuppose error theory too.¹⁶ So it’s understandable that Hardimon et al. tether eliminativism to error theory definitionally.

However natural, I think this is a mistake. Here are three reasons why, in ascending order of importance (because they build on each other).

First, tethering eliminativism to error theory generates conflation. It sometimes makes eliminativism seem utterly confused. Here’s Taylor (2013: 118): ‘*Tear that construct down*, the eliminativist

¹⁴I’m only using examples from philosophy of race, but more generally eliminativism is often defined to be tethered to error theory. See, e.g., Blackburn (1996: 116).

¹⁵There *may* be exceptions to this generalization, but this will depend on the finer details of how we define terms and interpret views. An anonymous referee grants that the generalization is true but claims that Haslanger is ‘a race realist who is an eliminativist. She thinks of races as hierarchical in nature, and wants to destroy that hierarchy. She wants to eliminate race.’ Haslanger’s view is that *prior* to the destruction of the racial hierarchy we should not eliminate ‘race’, but *afterwards* we should eliminate ‘race’ (2019a: 31–32). The latter claim is much less controversial than the former—though Jeffers (2013: 421; cf. 2019a, 2019b) denies it—and most discussions of eliminativism focus on the former claim.

¹⁶See especially Blum (2002: e.g., 164, 169).

says. Why? *Because it doesn't exist...* Obviously eliminativists don't wish to 'tear down' something they don't think exists. (As Zack (2003: 150) said, if 'race never existed, it cannot be eliminated'.) The apparent confusion arises because of a failure to demarcate eliminativism from error theory. These positions don't just answer different kinds of questions (one normative, one ontological). They have different targets: eliminativism concerns 'race' (the word); error theory concerns race (the object). Conflations of normative/ontological questions about 'race'/race have recurred in the literature. (I quote other examples, but I won't point them all out.) Our philosophical taxonomy should represent theoretical options clearly. To do so, we should cleanly separate eliminativism from error theory.

Second, tethering the two positions leaves one region of conceptual space unoccupiable by definitional fiat. This is most clear in Glasgow's taxonomy, which divides views according to their 'racial ontology' and their 'racial politics' (2006: 164; 2009: 9). The taxonomy leaves exactly one of the resulting four squares shaded (as in, it cannot be occupied): combining a realist racial ontology with an eliminativist racial politics. Crucially, this is framed as a taxonomy of 'the theoretical options' in the race debate. It doesn't say no one *has* combined a realist 'racial ontology' with an eliminativist 'racial politics'. It says no one *can* combine the two.

Since they answer different kinds of questions (normative, ontological) about 'race' and race respectively, why can't eliminativism and realism be combined? There's nothing *incoherent* in the position that it is typically wrong to engage in ordinary 'race' talk such as asserting (2), even though races exist, so racial terms can refer, so (2) can be true.

To bolster this, note that one option in the taxonomy is to say: races don't exist (error theory), but we should use 'race' talk (conservationism).¹⁷ Paul Taylor calls this combination of views 'quasi-racialism':

Instead of saying that racial discourse is false in the same pernicious way that lying is false, which is to say that, like lying, it ought to be eliminated wherever possible, the quasi-racialist says that it's false the way that myths are false (2013: 95).

'Quasi-racialism' is a form of fictionalism. This is a general strategy for error theorists to resist eliminativism in plenty of areas of philosophy.¹⁸ So it should be no surprise that error theorists can be conservationists. And as Taylor notes, many find quasi-racialism to be attractive (96-97):

Anyone who has said that ideas about race still shape social life, that this is true and important whether races exist or not, and that this is reason enough to keep talking about race, is a quasi-racialist.

Once we appreciate that conservationists can be error theorists or realists, it's hard to see why *by definition* eliminativists can only be error theorists. It sets up the debate with a startling asymmetry. If an *argument* had been offered for this asymmetry, it should be taken seriously. But none has. 'Eliminativism' has been defined this way as a stipulation.

Some may think that's a problem for my position: '*Eliminativism*' has been defined by stipulation, and you can't argue against a stipulation. Fair enough. But again, how we define this technical term is not the hill I want to die on. What's crucial is how we characterize the theoretical options in the

¹⁷Glasgow calls this 'reconstructionism'. I'm carving up the terrain slightly differently.

¹⁸Mills (1998: 45) analogized the theoretical positions in philosophy of race to those in metaethics; in the latter, many fictionalists are error theorists but not eliminativists.

debate. One can stipulate that eliminativism entails error theory, but not that *that view* is the main rival to conservatism. I've said how I'm using the term 'eliminativism'; you can call the view I describe something else, but I'm offering arguments that you should take *this view*, not the one that entails error theory, as one of the main theoretical options in the debate.

Moreover, there is a serious cost to stipulatively using *recherché* semantic and ontological stipulations in structuring this debate about 'race'. I noted above that philosophers who have been eliminativists have also been error theorists. But this may not be true of non-philosophers. As many note, the debate about 'race' is not confined to ivory towers: Haslanger, for instance, describes it as 'a practical and political issue that is best answered by well-informed activists at a specific historical moment' (2019a: 32). Consider, then, how the first special counsel for the NAACP, Charles Houston, advised lawyers defending efforts to fight segregation: 'The first thing I recommend is to deny the plaintiffs are white and the defendants are Negroes.' This was explained as an educational method:

Every time you drag these plaintiffs in and deny they are white, you begin to make them think about it. This is the beginning of an education on the subject. In denying your defendants are Negroes, you go on to question the standards of race. There are many people who cannot give any reason why they are white. They don't have any standard about Negroes either (quoted in Vose 1959: 60-61).¹⁹

I think activist practices like Hamilton's 'educational method' could sensibly fall under the label 'eliminativism'. But the practical and political rationale for those practices needn't involve any commitment to vacuity or error theory. So if we define by stipulation the options in the debate in a way that draws too much from philosophers' main commitments, we risk occluding how historically important activist positions fit into the debate.

Third, tethering eliminativism to error theory allows arguments against the latter to masquerade as arguments against the former. If there were a good reason why eliminativism entails error theory, this wouldn't be worrisome. But I contend that we should *not* think that eliminativism entails error theory. To eschew the jargon, what I mean is this: if we grant that races exist and 'race' refers, it can still be typically wrong to use 'race'. If I'm right, many realist defenses of conservatism miss their mark.

I'll support this with three examples.²⁰ Start with witches and 'witches'. Say we grant that witches exist and 'witch' refers. As I noted, this could be because being *regarded* as being magical suffices for being a witch. Or it could be because being a practitioner of Wicca suffices for being a witch.²¹ Either view would generate a form of realism about witches. But neither would obviously or automatically license one to assert things like (1). Even if (1) were true, it can have invidious perlocutionary effects.

Now consider slurs. I'll use an example from *Harry Potter*: 'mudblood', a slur that's applied to Muggle-born magicians. Now compare:

¹⁹I first learned of Hamilton's advice from Steil and Charles (2021: 52-53).

²⁰Interestingly, a similar point to the one I make here has been recently defended in debates about *gender* terms. Barnes (2020) and Dembroff (2018) argue that the metaphysics of gender does not determine the ethics of using gender terms. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) defend eliminativism about 'he' and 'she', but grant that they refer.

²¹The possibility of such a semantic view is discussed by Glasgow (2009: 7) and Appiah (2007: 38-39), but only in relation to how it affects our *ontological* commitments. Hochman (2020: 7) makes a point more similar to mine. ('It would be dangerous to call women witches in contexts in which "witches" are believed to be evil and are executed on this basis. That would be a way to get innocent people killed. On purely pragmatic grounds, it would be wiser and kinder to differentiate between "witches" and women falsely accused of being witches.') But this point is directed at a different target: 'conferralism'.

- (4) Hermione is a Muggle-born magician.
 (5) Hermione is a mudblood.

On one view, slurs are synonymous with neutral terms for the corresponding target group. So if (4) is true, (5) is true. But if (4) is permissible to assert, it does not follow that (5) is too! Why? Because the communicative content of assertions outstrips their literal meaning. So proponents of this view can say that (5) communicates something more than (4): it *derogates* Hermione, and other Muggle-born magicians. The derogatory content of slurs need not be part of their *semantic* content. Perhaps (5) *pragmatically implicates* this derogatory content.²² So slurs need not be vacuous for it to be typically wrong to use slurs.

Now consider generics. Generics aren't particular terms.²³ They're particular constructions, namely unquantified generalizations like:

- (6) Asians are smart.
 (7) Blacks are good at basketball.

Many hold that we typically should not assert racial generics like (6)-(7).²⁴ However, they do not hold that such generics are always false. On Sarah-Jane Leslie (2017)'s view, for example, there are multiple interpretations of generic generalizations like (6)-(7). On one, (6) is equivalent to the quantified generalization "Most Asians are smart", and is true just in case that statistical generalization is true. On another, (6) says *being smart* is a property that is widely possessed by members of the relevant racial group *in virtue of their common intrinsic nature*. The easy availability of the latter interpretation is why generics at least risk essentializing racial groups.²⁵ What views like Leslie's illustrate is that it can be wrong to assert a sentence even though it is ambiguous, and true on one interpretation. Indeed, the ambiguity of racial generics partly explains why they're so pernicious, as it allows for *semantic slippage*. Say someone asserts (7). This can communicate that Blacks have essences. But it is difficult for an interlocutor to refute that, or force the speaker to take responsibility for it. As Anderson, Haslanger, and Langton argue, the speaker can 'slide back and forth between different interpretations of their utterance', and 'avoid taking responsibility for the implications of their claims' (2012).

The upshot here is obvious: uses of terms can be wrong, even if the terms aren't vacuous and the relevant assertions can be true. We saw that was possible with 'witch' because of perlocutionary effects, with slurs because of pragmatic implicatures, and with generics because of ambiguity.

If this is right, it's at least *possible* to argue against error theory in ways that don't undermine eliminativism. I'll now suggest something stronger: some *actual* conservationist arguments against error theory do little to undermine eliminativism. Explaining why will require some set-up.

²²See *inter alia*, Potts (2005), Nunberg (2018), Bolinger (2017).

²³As such, they can't be *vacuous*. But since the vacuity of 'Black' is thought to matter because it makes claims like (2) systematically false, I think this example is relevant.

²⁴See Anderson, Haslanger, and Langton (2012), Wodak, Leslie, and Rhodes (2015), Wodak and Leslie (2017). Cf. Saul (2017) and Ritchie (2019) for arguments that we should use *some* generics about social groups, such as "Blacks face economic, legal, and social discrimination." Crucially, Saul and Ritchie grant what matters here: that we should not assert generics like (6) and (7) even if they attribute neutral or positive traits to racial groups.

²⁵I am using Leslie's preferred terminology (2008, 2014), but I am not assuming her semantic views. Those who endorse other semantic views typically grant that sentences like (6) and (7) "promote essentialist thinking about social categories" (Ritchie 2019: 2).

We'll start with the main argument for eliminativism, which, as I mentioned, uses error theory as a key premise.²⁶ The argument starts with the view that there's a systematic association between 'race' talk and *racialism* (Appiah 1996: 38-71; Zack 1994: 11). Racism involves a commitment to *racial essentialism*:²⁷ the view that members of each race share some distinctive, non-obvious, persistent property or underlying intrinsic nature that causally grounds their common properties and dispositions. Racial essentialism is a familiar part of folk psychology.²⁸ Consider Gordon Allport writing in *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954):

There is an inherent "Jewishness" in every Jew. The "soul of the Oriental," "Negro blood," Hitler's "Aryanism," "the peculiar genius of America," "the logical French-man," "the passionate Latin" — all represent a belief in essence. A mysterious mana (for good or ill) resides in a group, all of its members partaking thereof (173–174).²⁹

Eliminativists—Appiah (1996), Zack (2002), Blum (2002: 156-160)—argue that this connection to racialism makes 'race' talk vacuous. In other words, because there's no Black essence, Blacks don't exist, 'Black' doesn't refer, and sentences like 'Barack is Black' are all false. (I won't outline their various semantic arguments for this step in the argument.³⁰) And then they move from these premises to the conclusion that we should not engage in 'race' talk by asserting claims like 'Barack is Black'.³¹

Now we can get to a prominent conservationist response from Hardimon, whose main target in *Rethinking Race* is eliminativism. Hardimon does not deny that there is some important connection between 'race' talk and racialism: he grants 'the racialist concept of race resists extirpation', and is accepted by ordinary people (2018: 28-29, 169). But Hardimon claims that racialism is not part of the 'logical core' of the ordinary *concept* of race (2017: 28).³² Ordinary 'race' talk turns out to be ambig-

²⁶Glasgow (2006: 163, 2009: 113), and James (2017: §4) also treat it as such. The earliest version of it I know of is Montagu's (1964: 3). The most famous is Appiah's (1996).

²⁷Arguably, racialism also involves a commitment to a *racial hierarchy* as well as *racial essences*. See Appiah (1996: 54); Mallon (2006: 529, fn. 12); Hardimon (2017: ch. 1, 217n2).

²⁸Some philosophers of race continue to suggest that the putative problem with racial discourse is that '*race*' talk is *biological* (see §II). That's a mistake: *being biological* is not equivalent to *being essentialized*. Folk essentialism targets transparently non-biological entities (Newman and Knobe 2018). And race can be essentialized *socio-culturally* (see Anderson 2010: 167); Mills even argues that 'race' has been 'de-biologized' (1997: 78). So eliminativists are right note that racialism needn't be biological (e.g., Blum 2002: 133-7).

²⁹Some find the notion of a racial essence to be vague or mysterious (e.g., Machery and Faucher 2017: 1151). For an excellent discussion of folk essentialism, see Gelman (2003).

³⁰For overviews and critical discussion, see Mallon (2006) and Glasgow (2019a).

³¹This move often goes by *very* quickly. In summarizing Zack's views, Gracia and Smith write that 'we commit the fallacy of ontological obligation when we continue to use the term "race" as if we are referring to something real' (2018: 208). I don't know exactly what that means, but I suggest that the best way to understand the relevant premise here is that it invokes an alethic norm of assertion (Weiner 2005): assert that *p* only if *p*. This would get you from error theory to eliminativism about assertions. I don't know much discussion of this issue in the literature, though Glasgow suggests that the debate 'presupposes a principle of epistemic value: if our beliefs should be sensitive to available evidence, then it is bad both to believe in something that evidently doesn't exist, and to pretend that something that evidently does exist doesn't' (2009: 3-4; see also, 11, 16). This suggestion is framed in terms of belief, not assertion. But I'm not sure it works for either. Error theory concerns what exists, not what *evidently* exists. More generally, the truth of error theory is neither necessary nor sufficient if we invoke anything like a justification norm for assertion or belief (or thought or what have you).

³²Others follow Hardimon's pluralist view about the meaning of 'race'. Spencer helpfully explains pluralism as a commitment to polysemy, i.e., a form of ambiguity (2019b: 211).

uous; RACIALIST RACE is a meaning of racial terms, but not *the* meaning of racial terms. On some other meanings—like MINIMALIST RACE—racial terms refer, and races exist.

Grant that Hardimon's commitment to the ambiguity of 'race' talk supports the conclusions that 'race' is not vacuous, realism is true, and ordinary 'race' talk can be true. But it's intended to do more: to reject eliminativism, understood as a moral view. Does it succeed there?

I now want to note something surprising. Hardimon's semantic views about 'race' look a lot like common commitments about racial generics. Racial terms are ambiguous. On one interpretation, assertions like (2) can be true; on another, they're false and essentializing. Likewise, on one interpretation, assertions like (6)-(7) can be true; on another, they're false and essentializing. So you'd expect the aforementioned concerns about generics—the risk of essentializing, compounded by semantic slippage—to carry over to 'race' talk given Hardimon's semantic commitments.

Since 'eliminativism' is defined such that it entails error theory, Hardimon's arguments for realism are taken to support conservatism. But I suggest that when we divorce eliminativism from error theory, Hardimon's semantic commitments that undergird the arguments for realism suggest that 'race' talk is risky in the same ways that racial generics are risky—if anything, this seems to support eliminativism.³³ (I'll discuss Hardimon's brief responses to concerns about risk below.)

This problem is instructive: it underscores how by tethering eliminativism to error theory we allow arguments against the latter to masquerade as arguments against the former, when in fact they may support the former. I also think the way in which this problem arises helps to distinguish my position from those, like Mallon, who have held that the debate about 'race' should be normative, not semantic or metaphysical. My point is not that it's hard to resolve whether 'race' is vacuous; it's that vacuity is of fairly marginal relevance. Nor does my position suggest severing this debate about 'race' talk from philosophy of language; the debate may hinge on whether uses of 'race' have invidious perlocutionary effects, or implicatures, or racialist interpretations. So the moral debate shouldn't depend on whether 'race' refers; but it can be informed by work in philosophy of language that bears on what uses of 'race' *communicate*.³⁴

III | WHY ELIMINATIVISTS NEEDN'T ELIMINATE 'RACE'

In this section, I'll go further, arguing that the normative debate must be about *uses* of 'race', which is very different from *eliminating* the word. The debate between eliminativism and conservatism is often framed as if the central issue were something about the word 'race' itself. As we saw above, eliminativism is usually partly defined in terms of the commitment that: '[t]he word 'race' [...] as applied to human beings should be eliminated from our vocabulary' (Hardimon); 'we should eliminate ['race'] from our vocabulary' (Mills); 'race should be eliminated from discourse' (Gracia and Smith 2018); and, we should 'strike – that is, eliminate – race from our ontological vocabularies' (Taylor). You might think this commitment is naturally suggested by the name 'eliminativism'.

³³Some have noted that eliminativism can be motivated by arguments from risk: see especially Hochman (2017a: 66-67) and Glasgow (2007: 169). However, both frame the risks as that race will be seen as *biological*, not *essentialized*. And neither connects this issue to discussions of generics and semantic slippage, or Hardimon's semantic commitments.

³⁴This stance differs from Mallon's core concern, discussed above. But it also differs from Mallon's brief point that 'it is not clear that the semantically correct account of 'race' talk ought to dictate our use', because of their beneficial or harmful consequences (2006: 549-550). Our moral concerns about what's *communicated* needn't concern *consequences*.

But my second key point is that it's a mistake to understand the view, and hence the main options in the debate, in terms of this commitment. I'll offer three arguments for why the central issue should be *whether certain uses of 'race' are wrong*, not whether 'race' itself is somehow verboten.

First, the idea of 'eliminating terms' is an obscure metaphor. Words are abstract objects. How would you eliminate 'race' from your vocabulary? Or, better: how would you eliminate it *except via not using it*? (While this seems obvious, the only philosopher I know of who has made this point is Herman Cappelen,³⁵ in a different context.) So while it's orthodox to define 'eliminativism' as committed to the elimination of 'race', the view is far more perspicuously framed as concerning uses of 'race'.

Second, the metaphor of *eliminating 'race'* suggests a view that's far too broad. I foreshadowed this in relation to 'witch' discourse. Compare:

- (1) Hillary is a witch.
- (3) Hillary is believed to be a witch.

If you were committed to eliminating 'witch'—striking it from your vocabulary—you could not assert (1) or (3). Likewise, one committed to eliminating 'race' and race terms could not assert either of these claims:

- (2) Barack is Black.
- (8) Barack is perceived to be Black.

We should not saddle eliminativism with this commitment. For one, the intuitive position about 'witch' discourse is to oppose (1) but not (3), and the eliminativist holds an analogous position about 'race' discourse, so it should be at least open to eliminativists to oppose (2) but not (8). For another, the standard argument for eliminativism does not militate against both (2) and (8). If 'race' is vacuous, (2) is false; but (8) is still true!

This point has even greater force when eliminativism is motivated by moral concerns, rather than commitments to vacuity and error theory. It makes sense to evaluate *uses* of words, since such actions can be wrong. (As I noted, *uses* of concepts in belief and thought may also be wrong, but whether and when this is the case is a contentious matter I don't address.) But 'race' itself can't be wrong—to think otherwise is a category mistake.

You may think this is uncharitable: *No one thinks eliminativists are opposed to 'race'; and everyone knows the view is compatible with some uses of 'race'*. After all, in describing the commitments of (error-theoretic) eliminativists, Machery and Faucher (2017: 1138, fn 6) write: 'Although there are no races, there are groups that are identified as races.' But despite this, eliminativists are often treated as if they mistakenly oppose racial terms themselves and want to jettison them entirely. Haslanger (2019a: 31) says eliminativists support our 'ceasing to use racial terminology', which is 'unrealistic'. Hardimon takes it to be a mark against eliminativism that 'when it comes to race, we don't need fewer words. We need more' (2017: 174). If eliminativists accept that we should not assert (2), but we can assert (8), I don't see how to construe the view as holding that we must 'cease using racial terminology' or that we 'need fewer words'.

Conversely, conservatism is sometimes treated as just bearing the onus of establishing that racial terms (rather than uses thereof) are not wrong. I noted that given Hardimon's semantics, you

³⁵Cappellan (2018: 18). I also depart from Cappellan's brief account of *which* uses matter.

would expect uses of ‘race’ to be risky. Hardimon acknowledges this briefly: when using racial terms ‘people can illicitly slide from MIMINALIST to RACIALIST RACE, or illicitly invest the differences in shape and color ... with normative significance they do not have’ (2017: 6). Hardimon’s main response to this concern is that *culpability* for this is not born by ‘race’: the term is ‘nonmalefic’ (2017: 6).³⁶ But that’s not the issue. The issue is whether *uses* of ‘race’ are malefic.

To be clear, my goal here is not to defend eliminativism. My point is that construing the main rival to conservatism as if it must hold that the term ‘race’ itself is objectionable is a mistake. It’s a mistake because it paints a misleading picture of what’s at issue in the debate over ‘race’.

Third, the focus on the term ‘race’ rather than uses thereof has occluded some natural and fruitful lines of inquiry. To build up to this, let’s start with conservatism’s main objection to eliminativism: the ‘familiar concern’ that it ‘may deprive us of the tools we need to notice and respond to racial discrimination’ (Taylor 2013: 140). As Haslanger argues:³⁷

if we are going to understand the effects of slavery and long-standing racism in this country we need to have the resources to describe its systematic effects on racial groups.

Haslanger continues that such purposes require ordinary ‘race’ talk, like:

(9) Whites, on average, hold greater wealth than Blacks.

The argument, put simply, is that we need to describe the systematic effects of racism, and need to do so by asserting claims like (9), so we need to *conserve* rather than *eliminate* ‘race’ and racial terms like ‘Blacks’.

Many find this argument compelling.³⁸ The most popular response to it has been that we can in some sense replace *race* with *racialized groups*. This move often falls under the label ‘reconstructionism’.³⁹ But its proponents frequently frame the point focusing on concepts:⁴⁰ i.e., we should use RACIALIZED GROUP instead of the ordinary concept RACE, perhaps thereby revising the ordinary concept

³⁶There appear to be three other responses in the book. First, racial groups might be essentialized even if we don’t use ‘race’—‘differences of skin color, hair form, eye shape, and lip shape corresponding to differences in geographical ancestry do exist in nature and are readily recognized. Denying their existence won’t prevent racists from taking them as markers of racialist race’ Hardimon (2017: 7). But this is akin to saying that school stabbings might still occur if there are no AR15s available for school shootings: what matters is whether the risk is made less likely, not whether it is reduced to zero. Second, that uses of ‘race’ are not ‘bound to have catastrophic results’ (152). But this is akin to saying that the widespread availability of AR15s does not make school shootings inevitable, or bound to occur. It’s enough that it makes them more likely. Third, Hardimon says ‘The bad outcomes could be avoided through the deployment of nonracialist concepts of race’ (152). But why? Why would uses of the bare term ‘race’ with a nonracialist concept in mind be so safe? Does it change what’s communicated?

³⁷For various reasons, I think this argument is better than Glasgow’s concern that eliminativists must endorse certain political policies (2007: 173; 2009: 148), or the uncharitable view that eliminativism is somehow connected to a politics of ‘colorblindness’: see McGary (2012: 4), Sundstrom (2017: 494); Taylor (2013: 100) and Mills (2014: 94) are more careful in noting that eliminativists needn’t be ‘colorblind’.

³⁸Both Mills (2014: 94) and Appiah (2018: 132) treat this as the main problem facing eliminativism. For a list of references discussing the issue, see Glasgow (2019a: 137).

³⁹That label is used differently by Glasgow (2009, 2019) and Hochman (2017, 2020). I’m using it roughly in the way Hochman does, to pick out ‘the view that the groups that are commonly understood to be “races” are really racialized groups’ (2020: 2-3; cf. 2017: 76).

⁴⁰This is clearest in Hochman’s ‘a defense of racialization as a *concept*’ (2019: 1255).

RACE. So what should reconstructionists say about using the term ‘race’, and terms such as ‘Black’ in claims like (2)? One form of reconstructionism holds that we should replace ‘race’ with ‘racialized group’, and replace ‘Black’ with ‘racialized as Black’.⁴¹ This view is arguably the dominant version of eliminativism today.⁴²

Conservationists have objected to this reconstructionist response. Recently, Haslanger noted: ‘most neologisms don’t catch on’ (2019a: 33).⁴³ It has also been argued that talk of how people are *racialized* ‘appears sometimes to be a synonym for racial or racist meanings’ (Murji and Solomos 2005, 21). Much more can be said about how serious these problems are.⁴⁴ But my concern lies elsewhere. My goal is not to object to this version of reconstructionism that seeks to replace ‘race’ with ‘racialized group’. My goal is to point out how the dialectic that pushes eliminativists towards this view occludes a natural alternative.

Here’s the simple point. If eliminativists needn’t be committed to *eliminating* ‘race’, they needn’t be committed to *replacing* it either. To see why, return to ‘witch’ discourse. As Appiah (2007: 38-39) noted, we don’t need to be realists about witches to recognize the injustices of the Salem Witch Trials. And obviously we do not (and should not) describe its injustices by saying anything like ‘Witches were burnt at the stake’.⁴⁵ But nor do we need to do what Appiah (2007) and Glasgow (2019b: 248) seem to suggest, which is talk of ‘witchized’ people. *We don’t need a neologism*. What we already do is use the ordinary word ‘witch’ in attitude reports, e.g.: ‘People unjustly accused of being witches were burnt at the stake.’

Likewise, once we see eliminativists as opposing certain uses of ‘race’, not the term itself, *they don’t need to use a different term* (like ‘racialized group’). They can use racial terms in attitude reports. Indeed, this already occurs in much anti-racist discourse. Consider the first page of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, which describes ‘white America’s progress, or rather the progress of Americans who believe that they are white’ (2015: 5-6). Throughout the book, Coates (re)states anti-racist points with locutions like ‘Americans who need to be white’ (e.g., 8, 42, 97, 104, 108, 115). Why does Coates do this? Because injustices don’t occur *because some people are white*; they occur *because of some people’s attitudes towards whiteness*.

My point here is not that ‘people who need to be white’ should always be used in lieu of ‘white people’ or locutions concerning ‘racialization’.⁴⁶ My point is that nothing should bar eliminativists from using ‘race’ itself in locutions that concern a wide variety of attitudes towards race, which can

⁴¹I believe this is Blum’s view (2002: 165-166). Blum’s discussion encompasses whether we should ‘stop using racial words (“race”, “black”, “white”, “Caucasian”, “Asian” and so on)’ and whether we should ‘stop *thinking* of’ people as having races, and on both fronts Blum recommends that we replace ‘race’/RACE with ‘racialization’/RACIALIZATION. Hochman’s view is mostly framed *apropos* concepts (rather than words). However, I take Hochman (2020: 8) to hold that we should replace ‘race’/RACE with ‘racialization’/RACIALIZATION (like Blum), but we should use ‘Black’/BLACK to mean ‘racialized as Black’/RACIALIZED AS BLACK (like Glasgow: see below, fn. 54).

⁴²As an anonymous referee put this: ‘I understand reconstructionists as defending a form of eliminativism. They want to eliminate race-talk that assumes the reality of race and replace it with something else (most popularly, talk of racialization and racialized groups)’; and this position ‘has all but replaced eliminativism in the debate’. I’m very grateful to this referee for how their comments have influenced this section.

⁴³Haslanger’s response in (2012: 198-199) only targeted error theory, so I leave it aside.

⁴⁴See Hochman (2019) for a defense of RACIALIZATION. For a response, see Uyan (2021).

⁴⁵Relatedly, Zach has argued that ‘it is worse than disrespectful to deny that slaves were of the same race as their owners’, as they were declared to be of a different race ‘as an ideology that would justify and enable the practice of slavery’ (2003: 143-144).

⁴⁶As a referee rightly notes, ‘People may be racialized as white without “needing” to be.’

include someone *needing* to be white, *perceiving* another person to be Black, or *being (mis)understood* to be a member of a biological race.⁴⁷ Much work would need to be done to show that all anti-racist purposes can be adequately served by using locutions that concern attitudes towards race. (Structural racism will be where the rubber really hits the road.) I have not done that work here. But again, my goal is more modest: to show that once we see how eliminativists need not commit to eliminating ‘race’, they need not replace it either, but can instead use the ordinary term in locutions that directly and transparently concern racial attitudes.

A similar point holds for a less common but arguably more troubling objection to eliminativism, which concerns intra-group solidarity.⁴⁸ Ordinary race talk includes racial ascriptions like ‘We are Black’ as forms of ‘identity assertion’ that play a pivotal role in developing collective self-identities and solidarity among social groups. Much has been said about identity assertion and solidarity,⁴⁹ and their relation to eliminativism.⁵⁰ As before, many have held that eliminativists should replace ‘race’ with ‘racialized group’ in forms of identity assertion: ‘a black consciousness can be based not on race but on racialized identity’ (Blum 2002: 169). This is, again, predicated on the assumption that eliminativists must oppose forms of identity assertion like ‘We are Black’. I want to cast doubt on this.

That may sound very surprising. *Surely*, you might think, *eliminativists cannot tolerate locutions like ‘We are Black’!* For one thing, if their view is motivated by a racial error theory, such locutions will be false.⁵¹

However, let’s see what’s possible if the view *isn’t* committed to or motivated by an error theory. Consider slurs. Slurs typically derogate. If Draco says ‘Ah, this is where the mudbloods are hanging out!’, this is wrong in part because it derogates Muggle-born magicians. But if Hermione says this for the purpose of intra-group solidarity, the use of ‘mudblood’ communicates something very different and non-derogatory. This is an ‘appropriated’ use of slurs.⁵² Even for slurs, which may be casually construed as just plain verboten, context really matters.⁵³ So it’s far from clear that we must *eliminate* slurs. Plausibly, it is *typically* wrong to use slurs because slurs *typically* derogate, but there’s a principled exception for intra-group, solidarity-promoting uses of such terms.

My point is simply that insofar as eliminativists think that it is *typically* wrong to use ordinary ‘race’ talk, nothing precludes them from carving out a similar exception.⁵⁴ That exception can’t be *ad hoc*. So again, eliminativists would have their work cut out for them to show that the view can be motivated in a way that makes such an exception principled; I haven’t done that work here. My point is

⁴⁷I mention this last example in particular because at least on Hochman’s account, the concept RACIALIZED GROUPS denotes ‘groups misunderstood to be biological races’ (2020: 2, emphasis in original; see also 2019: 1246). So if eliminativists use ‘race’ in talk of *attitudes towards race*, this need not involve abandoning the concept RACIALIZATION. Once again, my point concerns which words (rather than which concepts) should be used.

⁴⁸This objection may get less airtime because conservationists who think of race as a form of domination or subordination have opposed these very forms of identity assertion. According to Haslanger, we should ‘refuse to be raced’ (2000: 48; cf. 2019a, 2019b).

⁴⁹See (Tilly 2002: 121), Shelby (2002), McPherson and Shelby (2004), Jeffers (2013, 2019a).

⁵⁰For a recent discussion and references, see Glasgow (2019a: 137).

⁵¹Keeping in mind the caveat from §I (about some plausible forms of reconstructionism).

⁵²See *inter alia* Hornsby (2001), Rahman (2012), and Ritchie (2017).

⁵³Anderson and Lepore, who take slurs to be ‘prohibited words’, write that in ‘cases of appropriation, a target group member can opt to use a slur *without* violating its prohibition because *his* membership provides a defeasible escape clause; most prohibitions invariably include such clauses’ (2013: 42, emphasis theirs).

⁵⁴I want to stress that this does *not* make the view ‘eliminativism for whites’. Not all non-white uses of racial terms will count as being *both* intra-group *and* solidarity-promoting.

simply that this strikes me as a natural argumentative line to pursue, albeit one that's occluded by the common assumption that eliminativists must oppose and replace racial terms.

IV | CONCLUSION

My main goal has been to argue that we should adopt a new way of thinking about a central debate in philosophy of race. It preserves the standard gloss that eliminativism about 'race' is akin to a natural view about 'witches'. But it offers a different characterization of that analogy: concerns about vacuity and error theory are fairly peripheral; and the central issue is whether certain ordinary uses of 'race' are morally wrong. I have, at no point, *argued* for eliminativism; that was not my goal, partly for reasons of brevity, and partly because I'm not that confident that the view is true. Instead, my goal has been to offer a different way of thinking about the debate: in other words, I've argued for an account of what we should be arguing about when we argue about eliminativism.

I want to close by considering the combined effect of my two main points for how we characterize the debate about 'race'. There are aspects of the debate I have not addressed head-on, since some discussions are more focused on concepts. (This includes a different form of reconstructionism than the one discussed in §III: that we should continue to use 'race', but use it to mean *RACIALIZED GROUP*, and likewise, continue to use 'Black' in locutions like (2), but use it to mean *RACIALIZED AS BLACK*.⁵⁵) However, I think the combined effect is still significant: we can make the debate about 'race' clearer, see how it is connected to adjacent debates in social and political philosophy of language, avoid allowing common patterns of argument against error theory to masquerade as arguments against eliminativism, and open up space for other forms of eliminativism than the now-dominant view that eliminativists must replace 'race'.

This is, of course, just the start. Perhaps the most important theme of this paper is that we should consider the error theory about race to be just one of many ways of motivating the view that certain ordinary uses of 'race' are typically wrong. (I have suggested but not developed other motivations: for example, that such uses of 'race' may have invidious *perlocutionary effects*.) How eliminativism is motivated matters enormously not just for whether we should think the view is true, but for even understanding its scope. To see why, let's return to a thread from §I: that 'race' terms appear in plenty of non-assertoric speech acts such as questions ('Is Barack Black?'). To date, the debate over eliminativism has neglected these entirely. It's easy to see why: unlike assertions, questions are not *false* if 'Black' is vacuous. But insofar as such questions form a key fragment of ordinary 'race' talk, this is an unfortunate lacuna. However, by reframing the debate and emphasizing connections to literature in social and political philosophy of language, we can see ways of filling in this gap. Asking 'Is Hermione a mudblood?' can derogate; asking 'Are Blacks good at basketball?' can essentialize. That's why the moral opposition to uses of slurs and generics often extends beyond assertions. If eliminativism is

⁵⁵I believe this is Glasgow's view: 'we should use [terms like 'race', 'Black'] to refer to wholly social categories' (2009: 2-3; see also 139-140), thereby revising *RACE* and *BLACK*. This is clearer in more recent work, where Glasgow explicitly distinguishes his view from Blum's, in that Blum would have us '*talk about real racialized groups even if there are no races*' whereas Glasgow would have us 'change the definition of 'race'' and continue to use the word: 'a race' should be redefined to mean something like a *socially racialized group*' (2019a: 137-8). So Glasgow's reconstructionism, unlike Blum's, at least looks close to conservationism. That said, there are complications here, including how we set the ambit of 'race' talk that is being conserved (see §I). These complications may further support shifting from a binary to a continuum of views in the 'race' debate (§IV).

motivated by drawing on resources from those literatures, this can be fruitful in expanding the scope of the view to cover a broader array of speech acts, and hence the scope of the debate.

There comes a point, however, where it's natural to wonder whether I've sketched new paths for *eliminativists* to pursue, rather than paths for a new middle ground view. If one's view is that we typically should not use 'race' talk in ordinary racial ascriptions like 'Barack is Black', it does not seem to be a form of *conservationism*; but if it allows uses of 'race' in racial attitude reports ('Barack is perceived to be Black'), and in intra-group solidarity-promoting racial ascriptions ('We are Black'), perhaps it is not a form of *eliminativism* either. I'm not opposed to this response. As I emphasized, I'm not that invested in how we use the technical term 'eliminativism'. I'm invested in how we represent the theoretical options in the debate. Arguably, it's time to abandon the eliminativism-conservationism binary and represent the options as a continuum of views, ordered in terms of how extensively and strongly they endorse or oppose ordinary uses of 'race' talk.⁵⁶ This recharacterization of the debate, like the one I've defended here, opens space for interesting non-conservationist options that don't oppose terms, don't entail error theory, and remain underexplored in the debate.

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⁵⁶We may need two axes here: for uses of terms ('race'/'Black') and of concepts.

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How to cite this article: Wodak D.. Of Witches and White Folks. *Philos Phenomenol Res.* 2021;00:1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12799>