

## Racial Epithets: What We Say and Mean by Them

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**ABSTRACT:** Racial epithets are terms used to characterize people on the basis of their race, and are often used to harm the people that they target. But what do racial epithets mean, and how do they work to harm in the way that they do? In this essay I set out to answer these questions by offering a pragmatic view of racial epithets, while contrasting my position with Christopher Hom's semantic view.

### Introduction

An epithet is "a term used to characterize a person or thing,"<sup>1</sup> and a racial epithet is a term used to characterize people on the basis of their race. Uses of racial epithets are language acts that are usually harmful to the people that they target. But what do racial epithets mean, and why are they harmful? In general, how do they do what they do? The purpose of this essay is to sketch an answer to these questions by providing an analysis of racial epithets. In doing so, I will draw on the tools provided by Elisabeth Camp in her analysis of metaphor, since Camp's analysis of metaphor is, in my view, the proper lens through which to understand racial epithets.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, since I provide a pragmatic view of racial epithets, I'll contrast my position with Christopher Hom's semantic view.<sup>3</sup>

### Characterizations

Since an epithet is "a term used to characterize a person," our first task is to get clear on what a "characterization" is. As Elisabeth Camp explains, "characterizing an object involves more than merely attributing a set of properties to it. Instead, those properties must be taken to 'hang together' in a certain structure" (Camp, 11). For instance, when we characterize someone as a "modern day Casanova" or as a "Stoic environmentalist," we are not simply attributing a list of "accidentally associated" properties to the person being characterized. When we characterize someone as a Stoic environmentalist, we are not saying of that per-

son that she "recycles on Wednesdays, is a descendent of Zeno, and is currently taking a course in Roman history." Rather, we characterize her as a Stoic environmentalist because we take certain properties of her as "hanging together" in a non-accidentally structured way.

This holistically connected structure of non-accidental properties belonging to the character of the Stoic environmentalist makes it fitting for some further properties to be attributed to her, while making other properties not fitting. It would be unfitting to the character of a Stoic environmentalist to flick a cigarette out of the window of her Hummer as she drives to her job at the tree-burning factory. Yet, it would be fitting for her to forsake a vacation to Vegas to spend her summer working for Greenpeace. When we characterize an individual, our beliefs and affective attitudes toward that individual form a coherent structure that make some further features fitting and others not (Camp, 139).

The constituent features of a characterization can vary in both their prominence and centrality (Camp, 13). The prominence of a feature is determined by both its usefulness in classifying the object to which that feature belongs (its diagnosticity), and that feature's contrastability with other features (its intensity). The centrality of a feature in a characterization is determined by its degree of connectedness with other features in that characterization. More central features have a higher degree of connectedness to other features. For instance, the Stoic environmentalist's bright green, Greenpeace T-shirt may be a prominent feature of her character, but needn't be

central. Her anonymous monthly monetary contributions to Greenpeace may be a central feature of her character, but needn't be prominent.

Additionally, not all features, or even actually possessed features, need to be included in a characterization of an individual. Given the features that we take to be central and prominent in our characterization of an individual, we may find other features to be accidental or out of place. If our Stoic environmentalist happens to be absent-minded and occasionally leaves an empty soda can behind after her lunch in the park, we may dismiss that feature of her as being in conflict with other more central features of her character. We'd reject it as uncharacteristic.

How we characterize someone will also affect how we interact with that person. This includes our expectations of her behavior and how we assign praise and blame to that person (Camp, 21). If our Stoic environmentalist dresses in clothing that may be considered worn by traditional standards and does not buy us expensive consumer gifts for the holidays, we might find it not only acceptable, but endearing of that person to act in such a way. Yet our interaction with our friend, the "Wall Street Bullfighter," acting in this way would not be met with equal understanding or acceptance.

And there are, of course, better and worse ways to characterize individuals. The individual that we have been characterizing as a "Stoic environmentalist" is aptly characterized in that way because that characterization ties together the features fitting of her character: that she makes monetary contributions to Greenpeace, forsakes vacation time to do volunteer work for Greenpeace, wears bright green, Greenpeace T-shirts, and is committed to such activities. However, applying the characterization of a "Mother Teresa" to her would be inapt, because it is not restrictive enough to capture her character as being particularly involved with environmental issues. Her do-good-ed-ness may not extend past environmental concerns. Yet to charac-

terize her as an environmental "weekend warrior" would also be inapt, because it is too restrictive to capture her character as being regularly involved with environmental issues. Her do-good-ed-ness, although particular, may be genuine and integral to her overall behavior. Better characterizations maximize the interconnectedness of fitting features while filtering out unfitting features, resulting in a more tightly structured and more reasonably organized perspective of the object being characterized (Camp, 116).

### Introducing Camp on Metaphor

Now that we have a primitive understanding of characterizations, let us take a look at metaphor. My view is that understanding Camp's analysis of how metaphors work will help us understand how racial epithets do their business too. So let's take a look at Elisabeth Camp's analysis of metaphor and appropriate from her the requisite tools to understand racial epithets.

According to Camp, "metaphor is a pragmatic phenomenon, on which speakers say one thing in order to mean another...The connection between what is said and what is meant is mediated by what I will call an *aspect* for thinking about the subject under discussion" (Camp, 1). The work of an aspect is that it "reconfigures one characterization in terms of another" (Camp, 21). For instance, consider Romeo's metaphorical assertion: "Juliet is the sun," intended to mean that Juliet is the warmth in Romeo's life, that his day begins and ends with her, and so on. In this metaphor "Juliet" is the subject under discussion and is the basis of comparison, and "is the sun" is the metaphorical phrase that is applied as an aspect under which to think about the subject. By applying the metaphorical phrase to the subject, we attempt to reconfigure our characterization of the subject in terms of the metaphorical phrase. We attempt to reorganize our way of thinking about Juliet by thinking of Juliet under the aspect of the sun.

For instance, although Romeo literally says, "Juliet is the sun," surely Romeo doesn't mean that. Juliet is a person, not a celestial body. By uttering the metaphorical statement "Juliet is the sun," although Romeo does not *semantically* express the features that he intends to predicate of Juliet, he *means* to communicate this *by way* of his utterance. Romeo is able to communicate what he means by virtue of the fact that in order to make sense of the metaphorical statement "Juliet is the sun," we search for the most prominent features of our characterization of the sun to see whether there are any matches to be found in our characterization of Juliet. We find that it is characteristic of the sun that it provides warmth for life, and that it is characteristic of Juliet that she provides warmth for Romeo's life. Moreover, we find that it is characteristic of the sun that the day begins and ends with it, and that it is characteristic of Juliet that Romeo's day begins and ends with her. In general, we take our characterization of the metaphorical phrase and our characterization of the subject and attempt to make our metaphorical characterization as fitting and central to our subject characterization as possible by finding features within the metaphorical characterization matching those within the subject characterization. (Camp, 25). We do this to reconfigure our characterization of the subject in terms of our characterization of the metaphorical phrase, to reorganize the structure of our thoughts about Juliet under the aspect of our characterization of the sun.

By thinking of the subject under the aspect of the metaphor, certain features of the subject that most closely match the features prominent in the metaphorical phrase are highlighted, reconfiguring which features will be salient in our characterization of the subject (Camp, 22). Thinking about Juliet under the aspect of the sun highlights certain features of her, such as her providing Romeo's life with warmth, and downplays others.

Clearly Romeo's metaphorical utterance does not commit him primarily to

the claim that Juliet literally is the sun. Rather, Romeo is primarily committed to predicating of Juliet that she is "the warmth in his life," that "his day begins and ends with her," and so on. We see that those features of the metaphorical phrase that are most prominent and that aid in the organization of salient features in the subject are the features that the speaker meant to predicate of the subject by uttering the metaphorical statement. For short, we'll call these features of the metaphorical phrase that are meant to be predicated of the subject "*M*-features," in line with Camp (Camp, 26).

### Meaning, Content, and Force

Before pressing on, let's get clear on what we mean by our various notions of communicative content. Semantic content refers to the content of what is said by an utterance, and is determined by the conventional meanings of terms and their composition. Pragmatic content refers to the content of what is meant by an utterance; it refers to what is communicated over and above the semantic content of an utterance, given the context, conversational presuppositions, and communicative principles in play. We may also consider, as a third type of content, the application of an aspect in reorganizing our characterization of a subject whose content is determined by the acceptance or rejection of some features as fitting to the subject's character and others not (Camp, 225).

In metaphor, we see that the speaker is not committed primarily to what she literally says, but rather to the *M*-features that are meant to be predicated of the subject through the cultivation of an aspect in thought (Camp, 196). Thus, properly speaking, the reconfiguration of one characterization in terms of another through aspect-application is not what is expressed in the semantic content of an assertion; it is not expressed in the content of what is said.

Richard Moran makes this point clear with his example of "negative metaphori-

cal statements" (Moran, 99-100). Moran considers the two metaphorical statements (a) "no man is an island" and (b) "every man is an island." In both (a) and (b), man is thought of under the aspect of an island, as Juliet was thought of under the aspect of the sun. To make sense of (a) and (b), we search for the most prominent features of our characterization of islands and see whether there are any matches to be found in our characterization of man. We find that islands are characteristically in isolation, and that at times man is characteristically in isolation too. By thinking of man under the aspect of an island, the feature "being in isolation" is highlighted in our characterization of man, reconfiguring which features we take to be salient in our characterization of him.

We see here that the reconfiguration of our characterization of man under the aspect of an island is successfully accomplished in both (a) and (b), even though in the first case the statement is denied while in the latter it is affirmed universally. In both cases of denial and affirmation, the reorganization of the features characteristic of man under the aspect of the features prominent in our characterization of an island still comes through successfully. Both the affirmation and denial of the metaphorical statement "still retain the effect of framing, of seeing one thing in terms of another" (Moran, 99-100). So, the reconfiguration of our characterization of man under the aspect of an island cannot be what is expressed in the semantic content of these metaphorical statements, or else the denial of the statement and the affirmation of the statement would semantically express the same thing. And clearly that can't be the case, on pain of contradiction.

Since the reconfiguration of one characterization in terms of another through aspect-application is not expressed in the semantic content of a statement, the full force of what is communicated by way of a metaphorical assertion cannot be countered by merely denying what is semantically expressed in the metaphorical state-

ment. You have not completely neutralized the metaphor's force in saying, "Tom is a snake, but he isn't really sneaky, slippery, or untrustworthy." You've still "framed" Tom as a snake even though you've denied these particular properties to Tom, and the introduction of other features and the adoption of other beliefs about Tom that fit this frame may still result. So it takes more to reject a metaphorical statement than merely denying the semantic content of what is communicated. In addition to this, we must deny the appropriateness of the "framing" itself. We must deny the appropriateness of the speaker's attempt to persuade us into "seeing one thing in terms of another." As Camp aptly puts the point, "to reject the metaphor entirely, one must...insist both that *what* she is getting at is false, and further that the *way* in which she is getting at it relies on an inaccurate and objectionable characterization" (Camp, 249).

### **The Lifecycle of Metaphor: The Poetic, the Routinized, and the Literal**

Metaphors seem to have a life and lifecycle of their own. Let's take a look at how a metaphor can transition from being poetic, to being routinized, to acquiring a literal meaning.

Consider the metaphorical statement "Juliet is the sun." It is quite poetic and invites us to explore which *M*-features are meant to be predicated of Juliet by considering Juliet under the aspect of the sun. As a poetic metaphor, it grants us the liberty to search out in a certain open-ended way what different possible *M*-features might be predicated of Juliet and the attitudes we might adopt in response. Is Juliet the center of Romeo's cognitive and emotional universe? She must mean everything to him. Is she so beautiful in Romeo's eyes that he is almost blinded by the sight of her? He must find her gorgeous. Does everything else have life and meaning only by virtue of being supported by the warmth of her presence? She must be quite the charmer. Poetic metaphors nudge

us to contemplate such possibilities and try on new attitudes in response.

But we also have more garden-variety metaphors, metaphors that are less poetic and more conventional. For instance, the metaphorical statement "Tom is a snake" is not very poetic, since it doesn't take much cognitive exploration to figure out which *M*-features are meant to be predicated of Tom. Tom is most likely a sneaky, slippery, untrustworthy guy. Our conventional use of this metaphor has in a sense robbed us of a great deal of the exploratory freedom in searching for which *M*-features are meant to be predicated of its subject (Camp, 33).

Finally, we have the has-been (dead) metaphors, those that at one point were metaphorical but have now been acquired as the literal meaning of a term. An obvious case is when we speak of the "mouth" of a bottle. At one point this may have been metaphorical, maybe even poetically so, but now there is no cognitive exploration required to figure out what is being predicated of the bottle. In cases such as these, there is no longer any "aspectual work" to be done cognitively, and we simply have a new literal meaning of the term "mouth" as being applied to the openings of bottles. One thing we notice from cases like these is that the semantic content of terms like "mouth" are often determined by the features conventionally meant to be predicated of a subject through aspect-application in its originating metaphorical ancestor.

### "Native Americans Are Apples."

We are now ready to analyze racial epithets. Let's start our analysis by considering the racial epithet "apple," a derogatory term directed towards Native Americans. The racial epithet "apple" is here used to characterize Native Americans as "red on the outside and white on the inside," or more straightforwardly, as members of a racial class who, in spite of their skin color, have "taken on the values and behavior of the white community" (Kipfer, 6).

My view is that when we say, "Native Americans are apples," or refer to Native Americans as "apples," we are attempting to reorganize our way of thinking of Native Americans by thinking of them under the aspect of apples. In this case, we take the most prominent features of our characterization of apples and find matches within our characterization of Native Americans as a class. By thinking of Native Americans under the aspect of apples, certain features of Native Americans that most closely match the features prominent in apples become highlighted, reconfiguring which features become salient in our characterization of Native Americans as a racial class. Those features of our characterization of apples that are most prominent and that aid in the organization of salient features in Native Americans are the features that the speaker using the racial epithet means to predicate of Native Americans. A speaker's racist utterance does not commit him primarily to the claim that Native Americans literally are apples, as that term is literally and non-derogatorily used. Rather, the speaker is primarily committed to predicating of Native Americans that they are "red on the outside" and that they "adopt the behavioral schema of the white community."

Allow me to spell this out more fully. Given our characterization of an apple as involving certain features, and our characterization of Native Americans as involving certain features, when a speaker asserts that "Native Americans are apples," or refers to Native Americans as "apples," we must take the appropriate cognitive steps in order to understand what the speaker is intending to communicate to us by that assertion. Although the speaker literally *says*, "Native Americans are apples," surely he doesn't *mean* that. Native Americans are a sort of people, not a sort of fruit. So we search for the most prominent features of our characterization of apples to see whether there are any matches to be found in our characterization of the class of Native Americans. We find that apples are characteristically red on the outside and

that Native Americans characteristically have reddish skin color. Color happens to be a feature we take as prominent in fruit and, for better or worse, in people also. Moreover, we find that apples are characteristically white on the inside, and as the racist intends for us to notice, that Native Americans tend to adopt the behavioral schema of the white community with which they interact. Native Americans are “white on the inside” too.

By thinking of Native Americans under the aspect of apples, the features of “having red skin color” and “adopting the behavioral schema of the white community” are highlighted in our characterization of Native Americans, reconfiguring which features we take to be salient in our characterization of them. The features of apples that are most prominent and that function to reorganize which features are taken as salient in Native Americans, the features of “having red skin color” and “being white on the inside,” are the features that the speaker means to predicate of Native Americans by uttering that racial epithet. The speaker does not mean what he literally says, that Native Americans are apples.

Clearly, there are harmful effects that result from characterizing Native Americans in this way. For as we’ve already seen, how we characterize someone will affect how we interact with the person characterized. Thinking of Native Americans under the aspect of apples—to think of Native Americans as “red on the outside and white on the inside”—will affect our expectations of the behavior of Native American individuals and affect how we will assign praise and blame to the members of that racial class. Once we come to think of Native Americans as members of a class who, in spite of their skin color, have taken on the values and behavioral schema of the white community, how we come to interact with Native American individuals is altered. By thinking of Native Americans in this way, we might find it fitting to also think of them as being generally submissive and having flexible value sys-

tems, since we believe that they do not assert their cultural identity and their corresponding values within the white community, but rather kneel to those of the white community instead.

Given the adoption of these beliefs, our interaction with Native American individuals is likely to be permeated by these beliefs. In my view, this can result not only in a superficial layer of disconnected racist acts towards other people, but rather in the adoption of a way of facing others and organizing our thoughts about them that is morally bankrupt. We have stopped treating Native Americans *as persons* and are now treating them on the basis of features that they may, or may not, in fact have, grounded on beliefs about their race that may, or may not, in fact be true. This is not how a person deserves to be treated. Calling Native Americans “apples” or referring to Native Americans as “apples” is therefore a language act that can be used to harm the people that that racial epithet targets.

Moreover, given the features that we take to be central to, and prominent in, Native Americans under the aspect of apples, we may now come to find other features to be out of place for a Native American’s character. By thinking of Native Americans as generally submissive, with flexible value systems, and with the tendency to adopt and imitate the behavioral schema of the white community, we may now come to find other features unfitting with these features. Granting these features to the Native American, we would now find it *unfitting* for a Native American to have the confidence to run a Fortune 500 company, the loyalty to work for the Marine Corps Intelligence Department, or to have a genuine concern for establishing new cultural activities within their community. As a result, Native Americans may be denied certain corporate and government positions as well as funding for establishing cultural clubs and events within their communities and universities.

Additionally, not only are racial epithets *harmful* to the members that they tar-

get, but they are also in general *bad* characterizations of the people that they attempt to characterize. We've seen that better characterizations maximize the interconnectedness of fitting features while filtering out unfitting features, resulting in a more tightly structured and more reasonably organized perspective of the object being characterized. Yet, it seems implausible, given any Native American individual that you might pick out, that most of the constituent features that make up the structured constellation of her character will find as their interconnecting link "reddish skin color" or "adopts the behavioral schema of the white community." In most cases, these features will not speak to the roles that that individual occupies in her family, professional, and extracurricular life. In terms of the features that make an individual the individual that she is, skin color or relations to the white community may play little or no role expressing who she is as a person. In most cases, therefore, racial epithets are both harmful to the people that they target and inaccurate of the people that they attempt to characterize.

### Hom's Semantic View

Let's now take a look at a different view of racial epithets, Christopher Hom's semantic view. According to Hom, "racial epithets literally *say* bad things, regardless of how they are used" (Hom, 1). On Hom's view, "epithets express derogatory semantic content in every context" (Hom, 22) and "the derogatory content of an epithet is semantically determined by... social institutions of racism" where "an institution of racism can be modeled as the composition of two entities: an ideology ['a set of (usually) negative beliefs'], and a set of practices" (Hom, 21). Moreover, Hom claims that the semantic content of racial epithets is determined by that epithet's "standing in the appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions" (Hom, 21-22).

Hom's idea is something like this. A term like "apple" originally stems from

an institution of racism towards Native Americans and is supported by this institution. This institution is composed of both negative beliefs about Native Americans and negative practices towards them based on these beliefs. Such negative beliefs might include beliefs that they are generally submissive, have flexible value systems, and are prone to adopt and imitate the behavioral schema of the white community. Negative practices might include anything from abrasive cartoons of Native Americans to physical violence towards them. Hom's claims is that "in effect, the racist says: 'you have *these* negative properties [expressed by the beliefs] and thus ought to be subject to *these* negative practices all because of *your* race'" (Hom, 22-23).

According to Hom, since racial epithets literally say bad things—they predicate negative properties to members of a racial class and semantically express that those members ought to be subject to particular negative practices on the basis of their race—racial epithets literally threaten and insult the racial members that they target (Hom, 22). On Hom's view, calling a Native American an "apple" is to *literally* threaten her and insult her on the basis of her race.

### Qualms with Hom's Semantic View

I have some qualms with Hom's semantic view. First, I disagree with Hom's claim that "racial epithets literally say bad things." Given my analysis so far, it should now be clear that the racist's utterance "Native Americans are apples" does not primarily commit the racist to the claim that Native Americans literally are apples, which is the semantic content expressed by that utterance. At least in derogatory cases like "Native Americans are apples," it is not the case that what is *said* by that utterance is derogatory. Rather, it is what is *meant* by that utterance that is derogatory.

We've seen that it is the features of our characterization of apples that are

most prominent and that function in the organization of new salient features in our characterization of Native Americans, specifically, that they are “red on the outside and white on the inside,” that the speaker using the racial epithet *meant* to predicate of Native Americans and so is committed to. In saying, “Native Americans are apples,” the racist does not mean to express that Native Americans are apples. He means to predicate the features “having red skin color” and “adopting the behavioral schema of the white community” to the Native American, which are the features cultivated in thought by considering Native Americans under the aspect of apples.

And my view seems reasonable. For although it is undeniable that something vulgar is happening when someone utters a racial epithet, it is not clear that what the utterance is doing is *semantically* expressing a threat. There seems to be a genuine semantic difference in asserting of a Native American *that he is an apple*, and asserting of a Native American *that he is an apple and that you’re going to do something about it*. Epithets are “term[s] used to characterize a person or thing,” so epithets do not by themselves issue threats to the person or thing that they characterize. And since the set of racial epithets is a subset of the set of epithets, *a fortiori* racial epithets as terms used to characterize members of a racial class do not by themselves issue threats to the members of the racial class that they characterize. We use racial epithets to derogate members of a racial class and can *mean* to threaten those members *by means* of them. But the threat is not part of what is *said*.

It is important to notice that the utterance of the racial epithet “apple” is harmful in that it provides us with the means to think of Native Americans under the aspect of apples, to adopt further beliefs on the basis of their fitting this inapt characterization, and to act in accordance and as a result of these negative beliefs. But even though the epithet is *used and meant* to harm, it does not *semantically*

*express the threat* to harm. My account, contra Hom’s, makes sense of our intuition that when we say to a Native American (a) “you’re an apple,” and (b) “you’re an apple and so I’m going to hurt you,” only in (b) is a genuine threat being expressed. Oddly, Hom’s view seems to suggest that (a) actually expresses a threat, and so (b) actually expresses a threat redundantly.

My next problem with Hom’s account is on the basis of the force of a racial epithet. For according to Hom, “the explosive, derogatory force of an epithet is directly proportional to the content of the property it expresses” (Hom, 23). If Hom is right, then it seems that we should in principle be able to neutralize the derogatory force of a racial epithet by denying the content of the properties that it expresses. However, it does not seem to be the case that the full derogatory force of an epithet can be denied by merely denying what is semantically expressed in an utterance of a racial epithet. For we saw that the metaphorical statement “Tom is a snake, but he isn’t really sneaky, slippery, or untrustworthy” could not be completely neutralized by simply denying the properties predicated of Tom, because we’ve still succeeded in framing Tom under the aspect of a snake. The “frame” remains, and the introduction of other features and the adoption of other negative beliefs about Tom that fit this frame may still result.

Similarly, the racist utterance “Native Americans are apples, but I deny that the beliefs *p*, *q*, and *r* and the threats *x*, *y*, and *z* apply to them” cannot be completely neutralized by simply denying the properties predicated of, and threats issued to, Native Americans, because the racist has still succeeded in framing Native Americans under the aspect of apples. The “frame” remains, and the introduction of other features and the adoption of other negative beliefs about Native Americans that fit this frame may still result. So it takes more to reject the assertion of a racial epithet than merely denying the semantic content of what is



communicated. We must also deny the appropriateness of the speaker's attempt to persuade us into "seeing one thing in terms of another." We must deny the very appropriateness of thinking of Native Americans under the aspect of apples. Since Hom's view does not account for aspects, it cannot account for denying the appropriateness of thinking of Native Americans under the aspect of apples. It cannot, therefore, account for the force of a racial epithet satisfactorily.

My next qualm with Hom's account is that it actually seems to be grounded upon something like my analysis. For as we saw in Hom's account, a racial epithet like "apple" as applied to Native Americans originally stems from an institution of racism and is supported by it. The institution from which a racial epithet stems is composed of negative beliefs about Native Americans and negative practices towards Native Americans based upon these beliefs. The negative beliefs held by this racist institution may include that they are generally submissive, have flexible value systems, and that they are prone to adopt the behavioral schema of the white community. Hom's view is that the semantic content of racial epithets is determined by that epithet's "standing in the appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions" (Hom, 21-22).

However, the negative beliefs held by this racist institution may also include *other* negative beliefs about Native Americans, such as that they are alcoholics, gamblers, and environmentally conscious to the point of being detached from the practicalities of contemporary society. There is a wide variation of possible negative practices towards Native Americans based upon and corresponding to the wide variation of negative beliefs about them. But what is it about the racial epithet "apple" that derogates in the *unique kind of way* that it does? What is it about the epithet "apple" that makes it *appropriate* to (inappropriately) racially derogate Native Americans in the way that it does?

It is not enough to say that the racist or racist institution holds negative beliefs about Native Americans (what kind of beliefs?), that the epithet "apple" semantically expresses these beliefs in virtue of standing in some "appropriate" causal relation to a racist institution, and that we adopt negative practices towards Native Americans as a result of this (what kind of practices?). Why do particular racial epithets map from a certain range of negative beliefs about a racial group to a certain range of negative practices towards that racial group, in the way that the racial epithet "apple" as applied to Native Americans clearly does? Saying that the epithet stands in the "appropriate causal connection to a racist institution" doesn't answer, but only sidesteps, the question. For at the moment of the racial epithet's conception, at the origin of the causal story, what was it about the epithet "apple" that made it *appropriate then* to derogate in the way that it does? In my view, Hom doesn't provide a convincing answer to this question.

However, I think I can speak to these points in the following way. At the time that the racist originally comes up with the racist utterance, "Native Americans are apples," he already has a certain perspective towards Native Americans in that he characterizes them in a racist way. He may believe of them that they are generally submissive, have flexible value systems, and are prone to adopt and imitate the behavioral schema of the white community. Maybe he believes other things about them too, but insofar as he thinks of *these* features as belonging to Native Americans in a holistically structured way (maybe he thinks it is *because* Native Americans adopt the behavioral schema of the white community that the other features follow), and insofar as he intends to communicate *these* structured thoughts about Native Americans, he will in a sense be cognitively situated to notice this organization of features as matching the organization of features that are prominent in the characterization of some other object that he

is familiar with. His characterization of apples would provide for this match.

In coming to think of the prominent features characteristic of apples as closely matching features within his characterization of Native Americans, he comes to think of Native Americans under the aspect of apples. By uttering the racist statement "Native Americans are apples," although he does not *semantically* express the features that he intends to predicate to Native Americans, he *means* to communicate this *by way* of his utterance. This explains what it is about the epithet "apple" that made it *originally apt* to derogate in the way that it does. And I think that this is a more satisfying answer than simply saying that the derogatory content of the epithet is determined by its "standing in the appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions" (Hom, 21-22). As I see it, that just doesn't explain very much.

### Room for Compromise?

Although I find serious problems with Hom's account of racial epithets as it stands, our views may not be *essentially* incompatible. Hom and I start from different paradigm cases, and so our analyses proceed from different directions. In this essay I have focused on more "poetic" racial epithets such as "apple" and "antique farm equipment," whereas Hom has focused on less poetic racial epithets such as "chink" and "nigger." In principle, one could attempt to unite poetic and non-poetic epithets in a way similar to how Camp unites poetic and non-poetic metaphors. The way that Camp does this with metaphor is by explaining that, in poetic metaphor, we are still cognitively utilizing an aspect in thought in order to determine the intended features to be predicated of the subject. Yet in non-poetic or dead metaphors, the aspect is no longer a cognitive tool aiding us in the determination of features predicated of the subject. Non-poetic metaphors are essentially 'reborn' with a semantic content of their own, as they are incorporat-

ed into the literal meaning of a term (i.e., the term "mouth" is now literally applied to the openings of bottles). I think that something like this may also hold for a great many poetic and non-poetic racial epithets, or at least for many of the particular ways in which these terms are used to derogate people on the basis of their race.

It seems fair to say that an account of racial epithets is fully adequate if and only if it can account for terms like "apple" as well as for terms like "nigger," at least insofar as the racial epithets "apple" and "nigger" are both taken to *characterize people on the basis of their race* and are used to derogate people on this basis. And although a term such as "nigger" may in some cases strike us as a more intuitive example of a racially derogating term, it still holds that insofar as terms such as "antique farm equipment" and "apple" are also *in fact* used to *characterize people on the basis of their race*, then they too are *by definition* racial epithets and so proper subjects for our analysis.<sup>4</sup> A good general theory of racial epithets, one that describes how we use them in different derogative practices, should remain sensitive to the entire range and variety of racial epithets that are actually used in different derogative practices.

Moreover, it is useful to consider epithets such as "antique farm equipment" in addition to those such as "nigger" when forming a general theory of racial epithets because there may be cases where terms such as "nigger" do not actually function as epithets whereas terms such as "antique farm equipment" do. For instance, if in some particular case the term "nigger" is *not* being used to *characterize people on the basis of their race*, then it is unclear in what sense we can still treat the term as functioning as a genuine epithet, racial or not. There may be cases, for example, where the term "nigger" is not used to characterize and so does not act as an *epithet* at all, but is used rather as a term for racial naming.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, insofar as a term such as "nigger" is used in some particu-

lar case as a racial epithet, then the term “nigger” in this case must be used to characterize someone on the basis of her race (say, by reference to “black” characteristics). By definition, that is what epithets do. So if the term “nigger” is in some particular case being used to characterize people on the basis of their race and so is acting as a racial epithet, then the account I’ve given of epithets and their characterizing functions is still applicable to that epithet as well.

### Conclusion

In this essay I have explained why racial epithets are harmful to the people that they target, why they are inaccurate characterizations of those they target, and how racial epithets can be appropriate to (inappropriately) derogate in the way that they do. In order to do this, I surveyed Elisabeth Camp’s analysis of metaphor and appropriated some of her tools for my purposes. I have situated my position against Christopher Hom’s semantic view and have argued from my position that Hom’s account is at points problematic and incomplete.

In conclusion, although my analysis of racial epithets in this essay leaves much more to be said, I have taken a close look at the various dimensions of a paradigm case that I believe is representative of the majority of other racial epithets. I chose the racial epithet “apple” because it is clearly not an exception case, and therefore an analysis of this epithet can be easily extended to many other cases. In the following post-section, I have provided a selected list of 145 other racial epithets that I believe are best understood through an analysis such as mine. Therefore, I think that any fully adequate account of racial epithets must take the points that I have made in this essay into consideration.

### 145 Other Racial Epithets that Are Best Accounted For by my Analysis

Cultivating the appropriate aspect with which to understand these racial

epithets is left to the reader as an exercise. Clearly in the cases of these utterances, I deny that both what the racist is intending to communicate is correct, and that the way she is going about it is correct. The following is only a selected list of racial epithets taken from *The Racial Slur Database* at <http://www.rsd.org/>.

“10% off,” “Abe Lincoln,” “ace of spades,” “Adolf,” “Aladdin,” “anchor baby,” “angus,” “antique farm equipment,” “ape,” “apple (also used towards African Americans, derogating in a different way),” “Apu,” “Arf,” “Aunt Jemima,” “Babar,” “baboon,” “bak guiy,” “banana,” “banjo lips,” “bat-gwai,” “Batman,” “bay frog,” “bean burrito,” “bean dipper,” “Beastie Boy,” “beaver beater,” “Bebe’s kids,” “bed time,” “bee-keeper,” “Betty Crocker,” “Big Mac,” “bird shit,” “bird turd,” “biscuit head,” “biscuit lips,” “black Barbie,” “black bean,” “bleach boy,” “block hoppers,” “blockbuster,” “bobble head,” “Boogie Man,” “border bunny,” “bounty bar,” “bourbon,” “branch manager,” “brass ankle,” “brown tractor,” “brownie,” “bruised banana,” “bucket,” “bucket head,” “bumblebee,” “bumper lips,” “burnt cracker,” “burnt match,” “burnt pizza,” “burnt rice,” “burnt toast,” “button head,” “cabbage,” “California roll,” “caramel,” “Casper,” “cast iron,” “cheddar,” “cheese nip,” “Cheshire cat,” “chocolate dipper,” “chocolate drop,” “chocolate covered marshmallow,” “clown,” “coal burner,” “coal miner,” “coconut,” “cookies n’ cream,” “cotton ball,” “cracker,” “Crayola,” “crick gypsy,” “crime stopper,” “Crisco,” “crow,” “dandruff,” “domino,” “double dip,” “dried shit,” “egg,” “fog horn,” “frog,” “germ,” “ghost,” “gingerbread man,” “graham cracker,” “grenade,” “Gumby,” “hamburger,” “ironing board,” “jarhead,” “jellybean,” “Jr. Mint,” “Kermit,” “killer bee,” “lamb chop,” “Lassie,” “leprechaun,” “lobster,” “mango,” “marshmallow,” “Martha Stewart,” “mayonnaise,” “McNugget,” “meat pie,” “milkman,” “moose,” “mosquito,” “mud,” “mud flaps,” “mud shark,” “mud turtle,” “negative,” “New York Met,” “nightlight,”

“Nike,” “nine iron,” “Oreo,” “peeled banana,” “Pepsi,” “pineapple,” “pizza bagel,” “polar bear,” “potato,” “power-point,” “primate,” “puck stop,” “rabbit,” “raccoon,” “radish,” “recyclables,” “rice

cracker,” “shovel,” “Simpson,” “smoke,” “snake,” “sneakers,” “snowflake,” “swine,” “taco shell,” “taxi,” “termite,” “turtleneck,” “Twinkie,” “wink,” “wound,” “yo-yo,” “zoo ape.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>From *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*: 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Since Camp has already argued elsewhere for her account of metaphor over competing accounts, and since this paper is focused primarily on understanding racial epithets rather than on situating Camp’s account within the framework of competing theories of metaphor, I refer the reader to her own work for both a thorough defense of her view and thorough criticisms of other views (*Saying and Seeing-As: The Linguistic Uses and Cognitive Effects of Metaphor*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>My sincere thanks go out to Christopher Hom for granting me permission to use his forthcoming article and to Elisabeth Camp for her insightful thoughts and criticisms.

<sup>4</sup>Recall from the introduction that an epithet is defined as “a term used to characterize a person or thing,” and a racial epithet is a term used to characterize people on the basis of their race. The racist term “apple” is used to characterize Native Americans as “red on the outside and white on the inside.” Clearly then, the term “apple” is in this case used to characterize Native Americans (and so is an epithet) on the basis of their race (and so is racial). So, in this case the term “apple” is a racial epithet by definition. I’d like to thank Elisabeth Camp and Luvell Anderson for pressing me on this point.

<sup>5</sup>For instance, two members belonging to the same racial group may refer to each other by means of a racial term, not as a means to derogatively characterize each other, but as a means for naming each other as fellow members belonging to the same racial group.

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