

Resisting Reclamation: Intra-Community Hierarchies and the R-Slur

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Abstract: This paper offers a critique of nascent efforts to reclaim the r-slur – referred to throughout the manuscript as the r-word so as not to beg the question of its normative status – grounded in Linda Martín Alcoff’s groundbreaking “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” In it, I argue that the question of the r-word’s reclamation fails to take into account the intra-community hierarchies that are reified when only some members of a slurred community – in this case, the community consisting of neurodivergent people & eynoldthose with intellectual disability, as well as others targeted by the r-word – are able to participate in a slur’s reclamation. I begin by discussing slur reclamation more generally, before using Alcoff’s work, alongside the writings of Emmalon Davis and Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò, to show why the reclamation of the r-word is fundamentally different than that of other slurs.

Keywords: disability, neurodivergence, slurs, reclamation

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Introduction

Slur reclamation is a topic of conversation both in academic texts and in public cultural discourse. Participants in these conversations ask: what does it mean to reclaim or repurpose a slur, and who is licensed to take part in this reclamation? Slur reclamation, I show in this paper, is intimately tied with conversations about speaking for others, often understood as conveying other individuals' or groups' beliefs in circumstances where they cannot or will not do so for themselves. Speaking for others is sometimes of political necessity. Resisting the impulse to speak for others can sometimes mask a narrow egocentrism from which individuals can only speak for themselves and to their own experiences and might wind up abdicating our "personal responsibility to speak out against oppression," as Linda Martin Alcoff writes (1991, 8). Speaking for others can be dangerous, though. It can be read as an "arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate" attempt to falsify a perspective (Alcoff 1991, 6). The topic at hand, then, is whether (and under what circumstances) slur reclamation might mimic the patterns of this problematic sort of speaking for others.

In what follows, I take up this critical question with respect to a particular slur – 'retard' and variations thereof, hereafter referred to as 'the r-word' – which targets persons with cognitive and intellectual disabilities. There is little academic writing about the r-word's reclamation or reclaimability, though the topic has come up in informal conversations about disability. The stance I take is that the r-word is fundamentally different from other slurs because the slurred characteristic (perceived and/or actual intellectual disability) is what prevents some of those who are targeted by it from reclaiming it. In other words, some disabled people are *owing to their disability*, unable to reclaim the slur. For example, nonverbal intellectually disabled people may not be able to participate in potentially reclaiming the r-word, despite their being a considerable demographic that is targeted by the word as a slur. This is not to say that intellectual disability is a monolith, but instead to suggest that disability activists and scholars, as well as those who debate slur reclamation more broadly, ought to think critically about who is represented in reclamation projects.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of the literature on slur reclamation. Though I do not get into the weeds of linguistics or philosophy of language, this background is important to establishing that slurs are (generally speaking) worse than 'mere' insults, and that there is an active conversation among academics about slurs' competing yet compatible uses. Here, I use 'queer' as an example of a word that has both slurring and reclaimed (i.e., non-slurring) uses, and whose reclamation has been relatively successful. In the next section, I introduce the word that's at issue here: the r-word. I provide some background on the term's uses, including an overview of the different directions that conversations about its reclamation might take. Ultimately, I conclude in the next section, the r-word cannot be reclaimed because of one fundamental difference between it and other slurs: some of those who are targeted by the r-slur are precluded, on the very basis of the slurred characteristic(s), from participating in its reclamation. Next and finally, I connect this argument to the problem of elite

capture, drawing both from Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò's work on the subject as well as Alcoff's highly regarded paper on speaking for others. To conclude, I offer some thoughts on the limitations to the scope of this project as well as further considerations about the politics of slur reclamation.

Slur Reclamation

In what follows, I provide an abbreviated overview of the literature on slurs and their reclamation, using 'queer' as a case of a slur which has been reclaimed relatively successfully.

Slurring and Reclaiming

There is disagreement among philosophers of language regarding how we ought to understand slurs and the features that make them uniquely harmful toward their targets. I will take for granted that slurs are pejorative or derogatory in their non-reclaimed uses; this is a necessary assumption to view slur reclamation as a legitimate phenomenon, because reclaimed uses must be fundamentally different from *something*. What, if anything, makes slurs different from mere insults remains to be seen.

On most accounts, slurs are not only different from mere insults; they are worse. Chris Cousens frames this worse-ness in terms of speech acts, writing that "slurring utterances are speech acts that oppress their targets," while (mere) insults do not actually perform oppression, even if they express it (2020, 4).¹ Slurs "contribute to the systematic and unjust subordination" – the oppression – of their targets by undermining generally-accepted norms of behavior and speech including, for instance, the norm holding that we should avoid representing or treating individuals negatively (Cousens 2020, 7-8). This is particularly true when a slur's use (as a slur, and not as a reclaimed term) goes uncontested. Other non-content-based understandings of the distinction between slurs and insults include Anderson and Lepore's argument that what makes slurs count as slurs is their status as "prohibited words" (2013, 38). This, they contend, helps to explain why many of us hesitate to use slurs (especially those that target groups we are not part of) even when quoting someone else. If the words themselves are prohibited, they are prohibited whether they are being used to derogate someone or to quote someone else who is derogating someone. Similarly, Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt contend that slurs actually change individuals' discursive roles by (dis)empowering particular groups depending on whether they are the target or the potential wielder of a slur (2018). Their view, like Cousens', shifts the focus of slurring away from features of words themselves, and toward what those words *do*.

Though the distinction between slurs and insults seems especially important when looking at slurs *as slurs*, that is, as insults with some additional feature, but it is not the focus of this paper. I am chiefly concerned with the social process of *reclaiming* slurs, which comes to attribute non-slurring uses to them. Slur reclamation refers to in-group slur use, or cases where a group typically targeted by a particular slur decides to use that slur among themselves. The slur thus loses at least some of its derogatory force, at least in those particular use cases (Brontsema

¹ Cousens arrives at this view of slurs contra semantic or content-based accounts like those proposed by Camp (2013) and Hom (2008). He finds that extant philosophies of slurs focus on content or degree, but do not sufficiently mark the distinction between slurs and insults. In other words, such accounts might claim that slurs are *worse insults* without asserting that they are worse *than* insults.

2004). Reclamation is not a zero-sum game; it is not quite true that slurs are either slurs in the derogatory sense or they are reclaimed. A group's reclaiming a slur does not entail that the word cannot still be used as a slur (that is, as a derogatory term), especially by those who are not group members. Luveell Anderson explains this in terms of slurs being used in a "camaraderie sense" (2018, 7). When a slur – Anderson focuses on the n-word – is used in a camaraderie sense, it loses its derogatory force *in that usage*, but that usage remains available *only* to in-group members (in the case of the n-word, Black people).

Similarly, Robin Jeshion identifies two different kinds of reclamation that a slur can undergo: pride reclamation and insular reclamation. The difference between the two largely hinges on the fact that, in cases of pride reclamation, the "representation," or the reclaimed slur, "is presented publicly as an apt way to reference the group," while cases of insular representation do not grant non-members license to reference the group with the reclaimed slur (2020, 107). Anderson's description of the n-word (above) fits the definition of insular reclamation, because only in-group members (Black people) are licensed to use the word. It remains prohibited (because slurring) in all other use cases. To further illustrate this difference, I turn now to a particular slur – 'queer' – and its reclamation.

Reclaiming 'Queer'

As evidenced by its transformation from a word with exclusively derogatory functions to one that many proudly claim as an identity and an academic discipline, the reclamation of 'queer' has been relatively successful as a pride-reclamatory project on Jeshion's taxonomy. In tracking the genealogy of 'queer's' reclamation, Erin Rand highlights a flyer plastered across New York City ahead of the 1990 Pride Parade, headlined: *Queers Read This*. The posters are often attributed to Queer Nation, an LGBTQ activist group founded by New York-based HIV/AIDS activists from ACT UP. Rand writes that the "new use of the word 'queer'" in the 1990s represented a "shift in activist ideologies, identities, and practices" away from assimilation and tolerance and toward "reclaim[ing] the gay community's rights to safety and humanity and to forge identity and strength from victimization" (2014, 3). Reclaiming 'queer,' then, is about even more than just (re)legitimizing it as an identity alongside other elements of the LGBTQ+ acronym; reclaiming queer is a *positive* movement, a *creative* movement, and not simply a restorative one.

What makes the reclamation of 'queer' so interesting is that, as Rand details, the word itself maintains so much internal and external contradiction. 'Queer's' status as reclaimed "diffuses the hate and intolerance associated with calling someone queer," though it doesn't erase (or *defuse*) the possibility of this hatred (Rand 2014, 4). 'Queer' can still be used as a slur, and its slurring uses look much like they did in the decades prior to its reclamation. 'Queer' also possesses different in-group meanings, which beget in-group questions; is everyone who identifies as members of LGBTQ+ communities queer by default, or are only those who identify as such properly queer? Do we need to use queer as a term with a "particular referent" — e.g., a particular sexuality — or might we embrace an even further-reaching "de-essentialized notion of queerness" (Rand 2014, 22)? Even Rand's beginning her own book with a brief history of Queer Nation is a choice that queers 'queer,' given the doubt she casts upon the centrality of the

organization to queer organizing. The queerness of ‘queer’ makes it hard to theorize about; it is a term that refuses to deal in absolutes.

Despite the (perhaps strategic) uncertainty and ambiguity that still surrounds the term, I do want to maintain that the reclamation of ‘queer’ has by and large been successful. ‘Queer’ has moved from having non-positive uses — Meredith G.F. Worthen identifies such uses as ranging from relatively neutral 16th century uses of ‘queer’ as ‘odd’ to the more familiar 19th-21st century ‘queer’-as-pejorative — to functioning (also) as an “empowering identity” term, particularly among younger generations (2023,; see Brontsema 2004). This does not, to be sure, discharge the word of its slurring uses; it can still be used as a slur, *even against those who proudly reclaim it* (Worthen 2023, 3).² Because of the term’s history, Brontsema actually dubs such slurring uses as its “re-pejoration,” suggesting that slurrers are responding *to* the term’s non-slurring (reclaimed or descriptive) usages (2004, 14). There’s something interesting happening here with respect to the chronology of slurring and reclaiming; are those who continue to use ‘queer’ as a slur (that is, as a pejorative) doing so in the same way that those pre-reclamation did, or are they doing it in a way that’s a direct confrontation of and response to the word’s reclamation? Moreover and more broadly, are all slurs similarly available for reclamation? This question will be taken up in the following section.

The R-Word

The r-word is generally taken to target a relatively small community: “individuals with intellectual disability,” who are implied to be (when the word is used as a slur) “stupid, incapable, and a devalued and undesirable group” (Siperstein et al. 2018, 142). The slurred group, those with intellectual disabilities (ID), refers to those who are limited in their “ability to learn at an expected level and function in daily life” (CDC; AAIDD). Accordingly, there are different ‘levels’ or ‘degrees’ of intellectual disability because different individuals with ID have different support needs. Intellectual disability has historically been diagnosed on the basis of IQ testing, but contemporary medical practitioners tend to take a (slightly) more holistic approach to diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association; NIH). Thus, cultural campaigns that have arisen in response to the r-word as the r-slur have focused on educating others about intellectual disability, and on educating them regarding the harms done by the slur. Theorists note the r-word’s origins in ‘legitimate’ medical discourse, pointing to its evolution from a “clinical term for individuals with ID [intellectual disability]” to “a highly pejorative term commonly used by youth as an insult to demean and denigrate others” owing to the aforementioned negative traits that become culturally associated with intellectual disability³ (Albert et al. 2016, 391). Though I think this may draw a misleading distinction between legitimate medical discourse and terms of abuse — given medicine’s history, I do not think we should leap to exonerate even ‘legitimate’ clinical terminology — this set of issues will be set aside for the purposes of this project. Relatedly, I will

² Interestingly, Worthen also conducts and cites quantitative work surrounding the word’s usage as such, which reveals a generational shift away from ‘queer’ as slur, though it also reveals a higher prevalence of slurring-use among Millennial cisgender men than among older (Gen X/Baby Boomer) cisgender men (ct. 2023, 3).

³ This is not, of course, to lend any credence to the claims that these negative traits — being “stupid” or “incapable” — are actually associated with ID.

for the time being set aside questions about the harms and potential values entailed by medicalization more broadly.⁴

It is important to note for the purposes of this project that categories like ‘neurodivergent,’ which have gained increasing recognition both within and outside of academic discourses, are not coextensive with intellectual disability. Though even the definition of neurodivergent is fluid and still the topic of much debate, not all neurodivergent people — according to *any* definition of the term — have intellectual disability. There may be some overlap between the two groups (as there often is between any two groups that aren’t diametrically opposed) but they do not name the exact same feature(s). In the sections below, I recognize that the r-word has often been used against neurodivergent persons, particularly those with autism spectrum disorders, even when they lack any ID. Accordingly, I amend the above definition of the r-word’s targets to include (at least some) autistic persons, irrespective of whether they also have ID.

Given the discussion above about the reclamation of words like ‘queer’ and the n-word, there seems to be a range of potential views about the reclamation of the r-word. Is the word reclaimable in the broad sense that ‘queer’ is, or is it reclaimable in the sense that some racial slurs lose their slurring force *only* when used among in-group members? Is it, to put the debate in the theoretical terms laid out above, subject to pride reclamation or merely insular reclamation? My answer is that it is suitable for neither species of reclamation, owing to unique characteristics of the targeted group (persons with intellectual disability), and of the relationship between the targeted group and potential participation in reclamatory projects, that are not present among sexuality, race, and gender groups.

On Unreclaimability

As mentioned, I find the r-word to be fundamentally unreclaimable because, unlike other slurs, some members of the slurred community are (by virtue of the slurred characteristic(s)) unable to participate in its reclamation. Prior to exploring the broader conceptual implications of this in the subsequent section, here I want to explain more thoroughly why this feature makes the r-word unique. In short, the r-word is unreclaimable because the very slurred characteristic renders some of the word’s targets unable to participate in its reclamation. This is not to say that reclamation needs to be a unanimous group decision – many members of the LGBTQ+ community continue to resist ‘queer’s reclamation – but that, in these other cases, there at least remains open the hypothetical *possibility* of group members’ participation in reclamation.

The central shortcoming of the (ongoing) movement to reclaim the r-word, and that which I think condemns the term’s potential reclamation to failure, lies in the fact that those who are positioned to be the most active and vocal participants in the reclamation movement are *necessarily not* those who represent the most stigmatized aspects of neurodivergence or ID.

⁴ This is, to be sure, an important conversation. Aspects of it are captured by Barnes (2016), Gagné-Julien (2021; 2022), Hayes and Hannold (2017) Kidd and Carel (2017), and Wardrope (2015), among others, as well as by the broader Mad Pride movement within psychiatry.

Some clarification here is warranted. People with autism and ID have often been described – or stratified – in terms of their (relative) functioning levels. That is, those with ‘less severe’ manifestations or symptoms have been described as ‘high(er) functioning.’ Regardless of whether an individual is labeled high or low functioning, “their unlikeness in relation to the nondisabled supersedes and likeness,” and so even the most ‘high functioning’ person is thought to function on a lower level than a neurotypical and nondisabled person (Yergeau⁵ 2018, 46). Functioning level is assessed in terms of proximity to ‘norms’ – themselves not morally innocuous – and seem to require a fixed referent. That is, to be described as high or low functioning is to be assessed in terms of your ability to approximate normative ways of being through (for instance) work, relationships, education, independent living, and so forth. To use such labels, then, reinforces the *normate* (see Reynolds 2019; Garland-Thomson 1997). Accordingly, a number of autistic scholars and other scholars of disability, including those who focus on ID, have suggested adopting language related to support needs rather than functioning levels (see Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). On this model, someone elsewhere described as ‘higher functioning’ would be redescribed as having ‘lower support needs’ and vice versa.

Regardless of whether disabilities are described in terms of functioning or support needs, the nature of intellectual and other neurodevelopmental disabilities is such that many of those who ‘fit’ these categories are unable to participate in the reclamation of the r-word. Those with more profound barriers to communication – including those for whom even AAC-mediated communication is not possible – are targeted by the slur but are unable to reclaim it. Thus, as I’ll explain in more depth in the subsequent section, there is a live worry that the movement to reclaim the r-word necessarily only represents the views of those who (despite having been targeted by the word as a slur) experience, in at least some respects, less profound communicative disruptions owing to their disabilities. Put another way, those who are typically considered lower functioning or having higher support needs are those who might be ‘most targeted’ by the r-word as slur yet are least able (if able at all) to reclaim it.

A critique might respond here by observing that this is not unique to the r-word. A counterexample might go as follows: an LGBTQ+ person in a rural area might be entirely insulated from the reclamation of ‘queer’. They may be fully unaware that ‘queer’ can be used as anything but a full-throated slur. They may be effectively unable to participate in the word’s reclamation owing to this insularity.

What makes this counterexample ineffective, though, is that it is not the person’s queerness – their belonging to the LGBTQ+ community – which bars them from participating in the reclamation of the word ‘queer.’ Of course, their queerness may have something to do with it; they may be targeted by ‘queer’ as a slur more often than others because of their sexuality or gender identity. But their queerness is not, on the whole, what precludes them from reclaiming ‘queer.’ They are precluded on other bases, like social and political circumstance, geographic location, and so on. The crucial difference here with the r-word is that many of those who cannot participate in reclaiming the r-word are unable to reclaim the word precisely because of those features the slur targets. This is not to say that the slur is apt or acceptable, of course, but simply that the reality of intellectual or neurodevelopmental disability is that it precludes some people who have such disabilities – and are thus targeted by the r-word as a slur – from reclaiming the

⁵ Yergeau writes of autism in particular, rather than ID.

slur because they might have less of a capacity (or a fully truncated capacity) to participate in verbal language, or to fully understand what it means for a word to be used derogatorily against them or for it to be a term of pride. Thus, my foremost reason for finding the r-word unreclaimable on the whole is that, unlike other slurs, the slurred characteristics *themselves* bar some of the targeted population from participating in its reclamation.

I have spoken of *some* members of the slurred community being unable (again, at the risk of being redundant, *owing to the slurred characteristics*) to participate in the r-word's reclamation. This leaves open the possibility that there are some members of the slurred community – some persons with ID, particularly those with less substantial barriers to verbal and written communication – who can reclaim the r-word. In what follows, I set out why I find even this reclaimed use to be troubling.

Speaking for Others, Silence, and Elite Capture

Thus far, I have established the r-word as unreclaimable because of its targeting a group consisting (partially) of those who, by virtue of the slurred characteristic, are unable to participate in its reclamation. My goal in this section is to construct an account of *why* this exclusion is particularly troubling. To achieve this, I use critical epistemologists' insights about inter- and intra-group hierarchies and elite capture, then show how those insights are exemplified by attempts to reclaim the r-word. I argue that the reclamation of the r-word necessarily reinforces the kinds of hierarchies that these theorists are concerned with.

In her groundbreaking “The Problem of Speaking for Others” (1991), Linda Martín Alcoff is chiefly concerned with cases where the privileged speak – or fail to speak, or outright refuse to speak – *for* an oppressed group they do not belong to. Such speaking is (and was at the time of the paper's publication) often viewed as “arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate” for two central reasons: first, because “a speaker's [social, political, etc.] location is epistemically salient” in the sense that *who* is speaking impacts *what* can be said, and second, because “certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous” (Alcoff 1991, 6; 7). This danger lies in the ways that privileged persons attempting to speak for the oppressed might not only fail to alleviate oppression; it might, in fact, worsen or amplify it.

Alcoff carefully weighs the benefits and drawbacks of practices of speaking-for, ultimately arguing that there are compelling reasons for and against speaking for others. Her conclusion, then, is not that we should shirk our responsibilities toward others, nor does she proclaim that we should speak for others whenever given the opportunity to do so. Alcoff's argument is that “anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved” (1991, 24). Speaking for others might be unavoidable, particularly for those with an attunement toward the fact that not everyone gets a chance to (literally or metaphorically) speak. Alcoff's answer is for speaking to be accompanied by “accountability and responsibility for what one says”; someone who attempts to speak for a marginalized group but fails to represent the group in a way that they (i.e., the marginalized group members) find acceptable, for instance, should not react defensively to this criticism but should instead take it seriously (ibid, 25). This does not mean automatically capitulating to whatever any member of that marginalized group says, but taking one's position as a speaker

whose words bear on others' political, discursive, and material circumstances seriously. Moreover, it entails thinking seriously about the trajectory that speech takes; for instance, if I say something about or for a group to which I do not belong (or even one that I do), might I inadvertently be licensing potential wrongdoers to weaponize my words and do harm to that same group?

There's an established relationship between speaking-for and tokenism, or the assignment of spokespersons for marginalized groups. Emmalon Davis argues that "positive stereotyping" — which often looks like the credibility inflation that some members of oppressed groups are granted within some contexts — can harm a subject "qua subject and transmitter of knowledge in virtue of the inflated estimation" (2016, 486). That is, Davis posits that being given more credibility than you're 'really' due (through what she calls prejudicial credibility excess⁶) can actually be harmful because it contributes to the "epistemic othering" of the spokesperson because their "capacities...are prejudicially assessed in such a way that bypasses or circumscribes the [spokesperson's] subjectivity" insofar as being forced to represent a social group is akin to being used as a sort of epistemic tool (2016, 490). That is, when selected marginalized speakers are, qua spokespersons, asked to speak for their group, they're only asked to do so as a means toward some other group's knowledge acquisition. Spokespersonship, Davis writes, constitutes a sort of "*de dicto*" inclusion in epistemic (and speaking) practices, because it merely reflects the individual's inclusion *owing to* some identity of theirs; they aren't treated as an individual, but instead are treated as interchangeable with any other group member (2016, 490). It also, of course, harms the group that is being spoken for by distilling an often wide range of perspectives to a single speaker's. Davis' chief contribution here is to call attention to the ways that speaking, being asked or allowed to speak, is not to be taken for granted. Her work urges us to ask who can speak and how they come to be licensed to speak.

What does any of this have to do with reclaiming the r-word, though, particularly when many of those who participate in slur reclamation movements would actively deny that they are acting as spokespersons or doing anything on anyone else's behalf? The connection between speech simpliciter (as in the case of speaking for others) and reclaiming slurs is easy to draw. Of course, slurring and reclaiming are particular species of speech. Moreover, though, I think we can think of slur reclamation as a kind of speech that has group-level (rather than merely individual) resonances. Even when individuals choose to reclaim a slur for themselves, they are reclaiming it as a member of a social group. As cases of pride reclamation show, too, there can be a slippage between individual reclamation and a broader licensing for others to use a reclaimed slur. The comparison between speaking and reclaiming a slur remains salient then because slur reclamation represents a kind of community-level linguistic structuring. Even when reclamation is contested, as with the word 'queer,' successful reclamation at least leads to some level of acceptance of the newly-reclaimed slur. Thus, we should be attuned to concerns about problematically speaking for others as well as the ways that spokespersonship — especially when understood as a way of speaking for others -- can play out in the domain of slur reclamation.

⁶ Audrey Yap (2017), too, writes about credibility excesses as injustices, though her account focuses on the excesses that accompany deficits, i.e., on the ways that sexual violence victims whose credibility is deflated are harmed not only by that deflation, but also by their perpetrators' credibility being *inflated*.

Táíwò's writing on elite capture pairs well with Davis's on spokespersons and Alcoff's on speaking for others because it too reflects questioning who is invited to be a spokesperson in the first place. Táíwò describes elite capture more generally, writing that it refers to the ways that "political projects can be hijacked in principle or in effect by the well positioned and resourced" (2022, 10).⁷ Even within a social movement focused on a single axis of identity, Táíwò contends, those who emerge or are positioned as leaders are likely to be those who, all things considered, are *generally* more privileged than other group members. A key example in the first chapter of his *Elite Capture* is the tension between the Black bourgeoisie (represented by "the immediate interests of a few well-positioned Black folk") and the broader Black liberation and anticolonial movements (Táíwò 2022, 21). What Táíwò is pointing to here is the co-optation of the Black liberation movement by a relatively small in-in-group, a minuscule subset of the broader group (Black people) the movement purports to represent. We might say, further, that being appointed a spokesperson or token can sometimes be evidence of elite capture, or at least something quite similar to it. This is not to deny any of the harms (epistemic, material, and otherwise) that Davis describes as coming about to spokespersons, but instead to draw attention to the ways that, perhaps paradoxically, there's a kind of privilege at play in determining who gets subjected to these harms. This privilege might be understood as privileging those who are "already in the room," or who are already proximate enough to the institutional backdrop against which a conversation is occurring (Táíwò 2022, 70).

Likewise, the notion of spokespersons being elite-captured is closely linked with the phenomena Alcoff identifies. Elite capture – or, to be more precise, those individuals who are identified as in-group elites and are asked to speak on a group's behalf – mimics the problematic instances of the privileged speaking for the oppressed that Alcoff identifies. In cases of elite capture, through their proximity to the privileged those members of marginalized groups that are 'accepted' (however precariously) into the dominant group can come to adopt some of the ways of seeing and speaking of their oppressors. In some cases this might be a self-conscious survival tactic while in others it may represent a quieter kind of internalization of the status quo.

My contention, then, is that elite capture can play out *among* neurodivergent and intellectually disabled persons. Accordingly, efforts to reclaim the r-word risk reifying or legitimizing intragroup hierarchies by championing the perspectives of the (relatively) privileged. The reclamation of the r-word exemplifies this, particularly when we ask: *who is able to participate in the word's reclamation?*

Consider the phenomenon of "Aspie supremacy" (Heilker 2012). The 'Aspie' here refers to Asperger Syndrome, an out-of-date diagnostic term that has since been merged into Autism Spectrum Disorder. Asperger⁸ Syndrome is often conflated with 'high-functioning' autism (see

⁷ A similar thread is found in Megan Ming Francis' work on movement capture, wherein she explores the phenomenon of social movements being 'captured' by privileged, often out-group, funders (2019; Francis & Witt 2021).

⁸ Part of the reason Asperger's has fallen out of fashion is that the eponymous physician, Hans Asperger, was a Nazi Party collaborator (de Hooge 2019; Klein 2023; Yeginsu 2018).

above for a discussion of functioning labels versus support needs labels), characterized by social impairments but often above-average intelligence (Yergeau 2018, 42; de Hooe 2019, 12). Aspies, according to Aspie Supremacists, are understood as “superior being[s], [though] deficient in chaotic morasses such as small-talk [...and the] double-standard-laden customs and values trumpeted by Neurotypicals” whose so-called shortcomings are more than offset by their “sharp, penetrating mind[s]” (Heilker 2012, 4). Aspie Supremacists view their own neurotype as “superior” both to neurotypical persons’ and, to an even greater extent, to [other⁹] autistics’. Anna de Hooe notes that we ought not conflate Aspie Supremacy with “autism supremacy,” as doing so “diverts attention from the systemic privilege intertwined with Aspie supremacy, and from the systemic oppression associated with being autistic,” suggesting that true *autism supremacy* would celebrate the wide range of neurotypes classified as autistic (2019, 3). Aspie Supremacy, then, is a movement that fundamentally centers those members of the autistic community who experience less profound disabilities. This is not, to be sure, to say that people with Asperger Syndrome (or what has now become labeled Level 1 Autism) are not disabled, but simply that they often require less substantial supports and accommodations than those with less-celebrated forms of autism.

I do not find it problematic to say that, all things considered, those autistic persons who would at one time have been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome are privileged *compared to* autistic persons with higher support needs. Being (able to identify as) an Aspie is not a moral victory, but it does reflect being placed on a higher position within a social hierarchy. It reflects, in other words, being designated as one of the autistic community’s ‘elites,’ to return to Táíwò’s terminology. I do not see ‘elite’ in this sense as a normative descriptor, but as one about relative privilege. Mark Deal’s work on inter-impairment hierarchies is insightful here (2003).

Returning to the case at hand, recall that the r-word is typically used as the r-*slur* against neurodivergent persons and those with other cognitive and intellectual disabilities. Many such disabilities interfere with individuals’ verbal development by, for instance, causing speech and otherwise global communicative delays. For some, this entails having stunted communicative skills compared to nondisabled adults. For others, the disability presents an even larger exclusion from linguistic practices. Many disabled persons are rendered nonspeaking or entirely nonverbal owing to their disabilities, and it is reasonable to assume that many such persons fall into the group that is targeted by the r-word *qua* slur, especially insofar as the r-*slur* derogates on the basis of intelligence and nonverbality is (however wrongfully) taken as unintelligence.

Those who are nonverbal, and especially nonverbal persons who are unable to use AAC devices or non-spoken language, are targeted by the r-word in its slurring uses but are effectively unable to participate in its reclamation. As mentioned above, unlike with other in-group exclusions from slur reclamation, this is uniquely *owing to the slurred characteristic*, i.e., actual or perceived disability. Those who can participate in the slur’s reclamation are those whose disability presents less of a barrier, or at least less consistent of a barrier, to verbal (spoken, written, or signed) communication. We should be wary of attempts to reclaim the r-word precisely because of the stratification among those who it might target. Any attempts to reclaim it will necessarily be led

⁹ Even among self-proclaimed Aspies, there is disagreement over whether Asperger Syndrome (even when it was a ‘valid’ diagnostic category) should be understood as one side of the autism spectrum, or whether it is categorically distinct.

by those whose disabilities prevent fewer barriers to communication. It is, in effect, an elite capture problem. Accordingly, by virtue of the very ‘slurred’ characteristic – to be clear, cognitive or intellectual disability or neurodivergence – some who are targeted by the r-slur are literally unable to reclaim it.

The ‘movement,’ if it can be identified as such, to reclaim the r-word is only made possible by making some members of the targeted communities – namely, those whose disabilities often present as ‘higher functioning’ – into spokespersons. To be sure, I do not think this is intentional; I do not think that individuals attempt to reclaim the r-word for the sake of speaking for or over other disabled people. Nonetheless, this is what winds up happening, in large part because those who are not able to participate in the word’s reclamation are often similarly unable to critique its reclamation. As a result, even when caretakers try and intervene, arguing against the r-word’s uses, including its reclaimed uses, they are charged with trying to speak for a community to which they do not belong in a problematic way, one that is not sufficiently informed by an analysis of social location and a given speech act’s potential uptake.

Concluding Concerns

In closing, I’d like to clarify the scope of my own project and gesture toward some other questions that may be worth pursuing. As mentioned, slur reclamation is morally fraught; there is disagreement about whether slurs can be reclaimed to begin with, but also about who is adequately licensed to participate in a particular act of reclamation.

There are some questions here that warrant further consideration. First, there is pushback within critical disability studies against our lending too much legitimacy to medical discourse, including diagnostic categories like those of autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, and so forth. I have tried not to center these concerns in this project, as I think the critique I offer stands regardless of whether we ‘buy in’ to extant diagnostic categories. Relatedly, I plan in future work to critically reflect on the ‘spectrum disorder’ approach to autism. Given the wide range of presentations that fall on the (purportedly singular) autism spectrum, it is unclear whether the label adequately captures *any* of them.

Lastly, I worry about lending legitimacy to intra-group hierarchies through this work. I hope to have made it clear that assessments of (e.g.) needing different levels of support are not a moral judgments, nor are they objective assessments. I’m aware of and concerned about the risk that this paper reifies intracommunity hierarchies via the suggestion that some disabled people face more pernicious ableism than others. Moreover, I worry that making these kinds of claims gives the impression that individuals with intellectual disability should (or can) be stratified according to the ‘extent’ of their disability, which comes dangerously close to mimicking discourses about high- and low-functioning status. I don’t want to suggest that those with intellectual disabilities are in any way lesser than those without such disabilities, or that such individuals shouldn’t have a role in cultural projects like reclamation. Instead, I want this paper to serve as a call to re-evaluate the role of intra-group differences in slur reclamation discourses, and to serve as a reminder that privilege can operate perniciously even *within* marginalized groups when relatively privileged members come to speak for entire groups.

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