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The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness

Anthropological research has shown that identities that are “not white enough” may be racially marked. Yet marking may also be the result of being “too white.” California high school students who embrace one such white identity, nerds, employ a superstandard language variety to reject the youth culture norm of coolness. These practices also ideologically position nerds as hyperwhite by distancing them from the African American underpinnings of European American youth culture.

As the explosion of the study of whiteness throughout the past decade continues with little sign of abatement, a corresponding set of critiques about the field’s foundational assumptions has also begun to emerge. Perhaps the most cogent of these critiques is the concern that in viewing whiteness as a normative, hegemonic, and unmarked racial position, scholars may be unwittingly reifying a singular and static version of whiteness. It is not the concept of racial unmarkedness itself that creates the problem but rather the common scholarly misperception that the unmarked status of whiteness is impervious to history, culture, or other local conditions. On the contrary, markedness theory, which can be traced back to its origins in linguistic theory (Trubetzkoy 1969), has been usefully extended to a broader semiotic context to provide a model of cultural ideologies, including racial ideologies.¹

Anthropology offers a perspective on markedness that is more sensitive to the instability of racial marking, as demonstrated most recently and thoroughly by the work of John Hartigan (1999). Through a close ethnographic

examination of the intraracial as well as interracial distinctions that shape whiteness in Detroit, Hartigan shows that certain white identities, such as "hillbillies," are racially marked because their class orientation and cultural style separate them from the middle-class white norm. Crucially, interracial ties between hillbillies and African Americans also contribute to the view that hillbillies display a "degraded form of whiteness" (Hartigan 1999:90). Thus while all whites are racially marked vis-à-vis blacks in inner-city Detroit insofar as their race is visible and salient, hillbillies are also racially marked vis-à-vis other whites insofar as their version of whiteness is both recognized and problematized as a racial subject position.

Hartigan's work suggests that there may be other styles of whiteness that are racially marked due to their lack of compliance with local ideologies of racial appropriateness. In particular, it raises the question of whether it is possible for white identities to be racially marked not for transgressing racial boundaries but for maintaining such boundaries too assiduously—that is, for being "too white." The present article addresses this question by offering an example of a white identity that is nonnormative, nonhegemonic, and highly marked in the local racial economy. This identity, the nerd, is racially marked precisely because individuals refuse to engage in cultural practices that originate across racialized lines and instead construct their identities by cleaving closely to the symbolic resources of an extreme whiteness, especially the resources of language.²

Nerds are members of a stigmatized social category who are stereotypically cast as intellectual overachievers and social underachievers. From the Columbine High School killers to Microsoft monopolist Bill Gates, the label *nerd* clearly has negative associations in American culture (especially when, as in these cases, it is used to explain highly antisocial behaviors). It is also, as such examples suggest, a cultural category that is both ideologically gendered (male) and racialized (white), although these dimensions are not always contextually foregrounded. Despite such cultural images, to be a nerd is not an inevitable social death sentence but instead is often a purposeful choice that allows those who embrace this identity to reject locally dominant social norms. In U.S. high schools, where such norms usually center on participation in youth culture, nerds stand out for their resistance to current trends, and more generally for their rejection of coolness as a desirable social goal.³ As the basic value of youth culture, coolness may be defined as engagement with and participation in the trends and practices of youth culture; it frequently involves a stance of affectlessness as well. In rejecting coolness, students who consider themselves nerds signal their distance from both the practices and the stances of trendier youth. Instead, they embrace the values of nerdiness, primarily intelligence. But in so doing, especially in contexts of racial diversity, the oppositional identity of the nerd becomes as salient for its racialized position as for its subcultural orientation.

Youth Culture and Racial Appropriation

One such context is Bay City High School, a large urban high school in the San Francisco Bay Area where I conducted a year of fieldwork in

1995–96.⁴ In spite of the school's tremendous racial and ethnic diversity, resulting in the visibility of whiteness as a racial category, white students at Bay City High frequently operated according to an ideological dichotomy between African Americans and European Americans, the two largest racialized groups at the school. This binary put many European American students into a double bind: on the one hand, they were often monitored by their white peers for incursions of blackness into their cultural styles, but on the other hand, many of the practices of European American youth cultures, including linguistic practices, are borrowed from African American teenagers. To remain both culturally and racially acceptable, white students had to maintain a delicate balance between embracing coolness and avoiding cultural practices that were racialized as black by their European American peers.

The black origins of many elements of youth culture in the United States have been well documented; trends in music, dance, fashion, sports, and language in a variety of youth subcultures are often traceable to an African American source (e.g., Kiesling, this issue; Lhamon 1990; Rose 1994). This connection is often obscured, however, for as increasing numbers of European American teenagers embrace particular black cultural practices, these practices become detached from blackness—they become *deracialized*, or racially unmarked, at least in the eyes of the white youths who participate in them. At the same time, such practices often lose their urban associations and become normalized in suburban and rural settings as well (witness the expansion of rap in the past decades). Even the concept of coolness itself stems from African American traditions (Morgan 1998).

As a result of their status as cultural innovators and trendsetters, black students at Bay City High, as elsewhere around the country (Solomon 1988), were often viewed by their white counterparts as cool almost by definition. Yet for European American teenagers to adopt elements of African American youth culture before the deracializing process was well under way was to risk being marked by their peers as racially problematic; this was the situation for many white hip-hop fans at the school. Conversely, for white teenagers to refuse to participate in youth culture in any form was likewise problematic, not only culturally but racially. It may be said that appropriate whiteness requires the appropriation of blackness, but only via those black styles that are becoming deracialized and hence no longer inevitably confer racial markedness on those who take them up.

White nerds disrupted this ideological arrangement by refusing to strive for coolness. The linguistic and other social practices that they engaged in indexed an uncool stance that was both culturally and racially marked: to be uncool in the context of the white racial visibility at Bay City High was to be racialized as hyperwhite, "too white." Consequently, the production of nerdiness via the rejection of coolness and the overt display of intelligence was often simultaneously (though not necessarily intentionally) the production of an extreme version of whiteness. Unlike the styles of cool European American students, in nerdiness African American culture and language did not play even a covert role. This is not to say that individuals who were not white never engaged in nerdy practices, but that when they did they

could be culturally understood as aligned with whiteness. This phenomenon is illustrated by the fact that, in U.S. culture generally, Asian Americans are ideologically positioned as the “model minority”—that is, the racialized group that most closely approaches “honorary” whiteness—in part because they are ideologically positioned as the nerdy minority, skilled in scientific and technical fields but utterly uncool (see Chun, this issue, for research that challenges this ideology). In general, then, white nerds were identifying not against blackness but against trendy whiteness, yet any dissociation from white youth trends entailed a dissociation from the black cultural forms from which those trends largely derive.

Membership in the nerd category, for purposes of this study, was not assigned by me but reported by students themselves, both nerds and non-nerds. Nerdiness is not an essence, of course, but a set of practices, engagements, and stances, and individuals oriented to nerdiness to a greater or lesser degree in their actions. Central to nerdy practice, as I have argued elsewhere (Bucholtz 1998, 1999a), is a particular emphasis on language as a resource for the production of an intelligent and nonconformist identity. I focus on a linguistic practice that simultaneously indexed such identities and marked speakers as non-normatively white: the use of superstandard English.

Language Ideology and Superstandard English

As several contributions to this special issue point out, ideologies of race are also ideologies of language, an unsurprising convergence given the long-standing association between ethnoracial and linguistic differentiation promoted both in early linguistic theorizing and in (other) nationalist projects (Bauman and Briggs 2000). The ideology of racial markedness therefore has as a corollary an ideology of linguistic markedness. In particular, the difficulty (which afflicts only white people) in seeing whites as racialized is matched by the difficulty (again, only for whites) in hearing white speakers’ language as racialized: as specifically white rather than neutral or normative—or standard. In such an arrangement, unmarked status confers power by allowing whiteness to move through the social world ghost-like, unseen and unheard, evident only in its effects. Likewise, the notion of a linguistic “standard,” which in the U.S. context is closely bound up with whiteness (Lippi-Green 1997), implies both unmarkedness (standard as ordinary) and power (standard as regulative).

Although there are numerous sociolinguistic treatments of Standard English from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Crowley 1989; Milroy and Milroy 1999; Silverstein 1996), scholarly opinion is remarkably unanimous. In nearly every discussion Standard English is located in opposition to nonstandard English (and sometimes to other languages); many commentators point out that Standard English, as it is usually defined, is not spoken at all but is a particular register of written language; and a number of authors note that Standard English does not, properly speaking, exist but rather is a prescriptive ideal. Such analyses, valuable as they are for correcting misapprehensions about the nature of sociolinguistic variation, do not always carefully

distinguish between the notion of an idealized prescriptive standard, usually based on formal written language, and the spoken vernacular believed most closely to approximate it. This spoken Standard English, as a primarily informal or colloquial variety, differs from formal written Standard English (Carter 1999; Cheshire 1999) but is still granted ideological authority as “the standard.” Thus spoken Standard English is positioned in relation not only to nonstandard English but also to what I call *superstandard English*.⁵ A linguistic superstandard is a variety that surpasses the prescriptive norm established by the standard. While available to some standard and nonstandard speakers as a special formal—and often written—register, when used as a social rather than situational variety the superstandard is restricted neither to formal contexts nor to written language. For some speakers, the superstandard may be the everyday, “unmarked” variety for ordinary interaction.

Superstandard English contrasts linguistically with Standard English in its greater use of “supercorrect” linguistic variables: lexical formality, carefully articulated phonological forms, and prescriptively standard grammar. It may also go beyond traditional norms of prescriptive correctness, to the point of occasionally over-applying prescriptive rules and producing hypercorrect forms. But the recognition of such difference is at least as ideologically as linguistically motivated. It is precisely because of the robustness of the ideology of Standard English in the United States that those linguistic varieties generally classified as nonstandard—African American Vernacular English foremost among them—are regularly held up as divergent from the standard despite considerable overlap in grammar, phonology, and the lexicon. By the same token, the superstandard need not deviate substantively from the colloquial standard in order to be considered distinctive; because it is marked with respect to Standard English forms, even relatively slight use of supercorrection and hypercorrection can call attention to itself. Superstandard English is therefore a marked variety that may contrast ideologically both with the unmarked colloquial standard and with marked nonstandard English. However, because it draws on the prescriptive standard, it also contributes to the linguistic ideologies that elevate one linguistic variety over others. How these varieties come to be associated with particular racial positions—that is, how they become racialized styles—is likewise the work of ideology.

Ideologies of Style

Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (Irvine in press; Irvine and Gal 2000) have delineated three semiotic processes through which language ideologies perform cultural work: iconization, fractal recursivity, and erasure. Iconization is the counterpart of indexicality, a semiotic process described in detail by several linguistic anthropologists (e.g., Ochs 1990; Silverstein 1976). Indexicality involves the establishment of a connection between a linguistic form and its social significance through the recognition of their repeated conjunction; although there is no inevitable tie between form and meaning, it eventually comes to be seen as inevitable and hence ideological. In iconization,

the ideological tie between form and social meaning is stronger still: the characteristics of a language are seen as a reflection of the essential characteristics of its users. The relationship is therefore not merely one of (perceived) juxtaposition, as in indexicality, but of (perceived) resemblance. The second process that Irvine and Gal identify, fractal recursivity, also works by analogy. A linguistic relationship thought to obtain in one kind of social arrangement (e.g., situation-based register variation) may be replicated in other arrangements as well, at levels both more general (e.g., interspeaker dialect variation) and more specific (e.g., intraspeaker stylistic variation) than the initiating arrangement. Such reiteration of the same semiotic relationship on different orders of magnitude, akin to fractal geometry, is what is meant by fractal recursivity. Erasure, the third semiotic process employed in language ideologies, involves not reproduction but reduction; sociolinguistic phenomena that clash with, fail to conform to, or otherwise threaten a given language ideology may be systematically ignored or denied, stricken from the ideological record.

Because this framework is semiotic and not exclusively linguistic, it may be expanded to include the interaction of nonlinguistic and linguistic ideologies as well as the process whereby the former give rise to the latter. That is, these semiotic processes are operative not only within language ideologies but also across ideological families, so that ideologies of language may be mapped onto corresponding ideologies of race, which they support. The set of language ideologies that this article is concerned with surround Standard English and its alternatives superstandard English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE); the set of racial ideologies at issue involves whiteness and its alternatives hyperwhiteness and blackness. Through iconization, the (ideologically arrived-at) characteristics of each language variety come to typify (and not simply to index) the youth subculture that uses (or is thought to use) it; through fractal recursivity this mapping is replicated on the racial level by linking language varieties to racialized groups; through erasure one such set of mappings is taken as most “basic” and hence least recognizable—in other words, these mappings are unmarked.⁶

Nerds and Slang

In their use of superstandard English to set themselves apart from cool students, nerds at Bay City High showed an awareness of some of these ideological dimensions. One characteristic of superstandard English is its lack of current slang. By avoiding particular linguistic forms, speakers can separate themselves from the social category indexically associated with such forms; thus the absence of slang in nerds’ speech symbolically distanced them from their cooler peers. When I asked nerdy students to discuss current slang, which other students usually found the most enjoyable part of the interviews I conducted, most expressed dismay at the task and professed unfamiliarity with the terms (one of the rare instances when the nerdy teenagers I spoke to were willing to admit to ignorance). They also removed themselves from the slang terms they did know in various ways, such as

providing literal, nonslang definitions for the slang terms I presented to them on slips of paper (Example 1) or offering nonslang terms that convey the same meaning (Example 2).

In Example 1, Bob, Conqueror of the Universe, announces to her friends the slang word (*blood*), an affiliative address term, which is printed on the slip of paper she has selected:⁷

1. Bob: [bl :d]. B-L. O-O. D. The word is [blʌd]. . . . That's the stuff which is inside of your veins. That's the stuff that—I don't know. I haven't gotten to that chapter yet.

Bob turns the task of defining slang terms into a quasi-academic activity by humorously invoking the format of a spelling bee (state the word, spell it, restate it). This academic orientation continues in her formal, literal definition of the term and her allusion to one of her textbooks where the answer can be found. Through such strategies Bob repeatedly distances herself from the use of slang while simultaneously invoking discourse genres and topics associated with intelligence.

Where Bob emphasizes her unfamiliarity with this slang term (even as she reveals her awareness of it through a marked, "black," pronunciation, as discussed below), Erich asserts that the absence of slang in his lexicon is a matter of preference. As with other people, I asked Erich to comment on which of the printed slang terms he uses. In response, Erich rejects slang as a whole while making clear that some of the activities that the words refer to are relevant to his life:

2. Erich: The idea behind the term fits but the term itself doesn't- isn't the way I prefer it to be. Like "kick back." I just prefer something- some normal term. . . . Like "to relax." . . . Something like that.

Erich's view of slang involves a process of iconization that brings youthful trendiness into the pragmatic orbit of such lexical items. Just as slang is trendy (not "normal"), so too are its speakers. Erich avoids slang not because of its referential meaning but because of the semiotic meaning that iconization assigns to it.

Of course, students who described themselves as nerds did use some slang, particularly older terms. But these items were often marked in some way in their speech, as when Claire explained why she does not like many people:

3. Claire: When it seems to me that people are really young <i.e., immature>, it's like their emotional response to different things just seems [dʒʌst simz] really w-(.)wacked.

Claire's utterance of the slang term *wack(ed)* is preceded by a false start and a brief pause, both signals of some kind of production difficulty. Whether her hesitance is due to uncertainty about the term or simply its appropriateness in front of me, it highlights the word as unusual for Claire, at least in this context. Supporting this interpretation is her formal, careful language

elsewhere in her turn (such as *emotional response* and the full articulation of *just seems*) and the standardized form of the slang term itself, which more usually occurred as *wack*. In adding a Standard English past participial marker to a word popularized by African American students, then, Claire reveals that she is not quite as cool as her use of the term might imply. (At the time of the study, Claire was deliberately trying to become cooler, mainly by smoking marijuana, while retaining her commitment to nerdy ideals like intelligence.) What is more, her standardization of African American Vernacular English grammar is not racially neutral: through fractal recursivity, the two variants Claire chooses between are linked to racial categories. Hence the supercorrect *wacked* is not only more standard but also whiter than the original term.

The Phonology of Superstandard English

The recursivity seen in Example 3 participates in a widespread racialized language ideology. Among European American students at Bay City High School, a three-way ideological division of English corresponded to similarly ideologically based social divisions: most students of color were thought to speak nonstandard English, most white students were thought to speak colloquial Standard English, and nerds, who did not always incorporate colloquial forms into their speech, were heard to speak an exaggeratedly formal version of Standard English; that is, superstandard English. Superstandard English, unlike Standard English, was a marked linguistic variety among European American students at Bay City High School. Evoking the registers of scholarship and science, nerds' use of superstandard English produced a very different kind of identity than did the colloquial Standard English used by cooler students. And as noted above, because of the ideological force of Standard English, even the slightest use of marked linguistic forms could be sufficient to produce a semiotic distinction. Thus in nerds' speech colloquial forms are juxtaposed with superstandard varieties (a violation of Ervin-Tripp's [1973] "co-occurrence rules"). As with most linguistic variables, the use of superstandard features is not categorical.

One linguistic strategy that nerds used to make their speech distinctive was to imbue it with a measured quality, which lent a certain *gravitas* to their words, particularly as a result of resistance to phonological processes characteristic of colloquial speech, such as consonant-cluster simplification and the phonological reduction of unstressed vowels. Claire's pronunciation in Example 3 above illustrates the former pattern; Example 4 exemplifies the latter. In 4a, Erich describes his difficulties with another student in the school's computer club; in 4b he talks about construction problems in his neighborhood.

- 4a. He made up all these rules that he sort o- we sort of voted on and I didn't vote on them [ðɛm] because I wasn't there that day, and I have to abide by them [ðɛm].
- 4b. They're going to [gɔɪŋ tu] have to [hæv tu] change- close off streets . . .

Erich's careful pronunciation in these examples is all the more remarkable given that the items in Example 4 occur in linguistic contexts that favor the phonological reduction of these words to *'em*, *goin'* or *gonna*, and *hafta*. The lack of stress on both tokens of *them* in 4a, the nasal of *on* preceding the first token, and the grammaticalized function of *going (to)* and *have (to)* in 4b all promote reduced phonological forms, but Erich resists the effects of linguistic environment on his speech.

This precisely enunciated speech style has semiotic connections to literacy: nerdy teenagers frequently used something akin to "reading style" (Labov 1972) even in their spontaneous conversations.⁸ Indeed, nerdy students occasionally employed pronunciations based on spelling rather than speech, such as [folk] for *folk* and [hɔŋ kɔŋg] for *Hong Kong*, as well as noncustomary pronunciations of words they encountered in their extensive reading but had not heard uttered aloud: for example, Loden pronounced her pseudonym as [lɔdɪ] rather than the more usual [lodŋ]; the name came from a class assignment. Here again iconization is at work. Nerds' careful speech style approximates in the spoken channel the linguistic forms as they would be written (this is especially clear in the use of spelling pronunciation).

This iconic link between careful speech and reading, moreover, forms the basis of a secondary link between careful speech and intelligence, via the (ideological) indexical association of advanced literacy, extensive education, and high intelligence. And intelligence in turn was associated, at least by nerds, with independent thought: a refusal to go along with the crowd whether in fashion or in phonology. The iconicity between resisting phonological pressure and resisting peer pressure is a shortcut through the chain of semiotic links already established. Erich invokes this association in Example 5, in which he explains why he thinks the term *sophisticated* applies to himself and his best friend, Micah:

5. Erich: We're not sophisticated in a bad sense, we just have uh much-we're much more advanced (.) in terms of uh (.) (xxx) in terms of the our- our ways of perceiving things, at least (.) myself and Micah. <Mary: What do you mean by that?> We don't think- I don't think of anything in a normal way., <Mary: Mm.> like uh and I don't- I use much more, I don't know how to describe it. I don't use all the abbreviations for words? <Mary: Hm.> Like most people abbreviate- cut off half the words? For no particular reason? And I don't do that. hhh <Mary: Like, do you have an example of that?> Uh uh they they they they they cut off the "g" on the end of "tripping" [trɪpɪŋ :] <Mary: Mm. Right.> (and end,) N apostrophe. It makes it makes no sense to me.

Erich connects sophistication, in its positive (i.e., nontrendy) sense, both to "advanced" and unconventional perspectives and to careful pronunciation. From the more elevated position that sophistication affords, the colloquial style of youth culture (and of U.S. culture more widely) simply "makes no sense." Here again Erich displays his rather clinical knowledge of slang even as he distances himself from it. His fastidious pronunciation of the slang word *tripping*, with a full superstandard [ŋ], is the linguistic equivalent of

holding a particularly distasteful scientific specimen between thumb and forefinger for inspection before it is discarded. This blending of casual and formal language allows Erich to display knowledge without embracing the identity usually associated with such knowledge. Aware of my interest in language, Erich takes a researcherly analytic stance toward his own linguistic style.

Superstandard Grammar and Lexis

Related to the phonological formality of nerdy speech is its lexical formality. Nerds often chose formal-register polysyllabic variants of Greco-Latinate origin over more colloquial Germanic monosyllables, a longstanding stylistic distinction based on ideologies in the history of the English language. But where in Standard English these lexical items are associated with different registers, in superstandard English they were used across registers. Such lexical items therefore had the indexical effect of making speakers sound smart or learned. In Examples 6a and b, Erich discusses how he is different from other students at Bay City High:

- 6a. I just can't stand people who have all the outward signs of being an extremely stupid person.
- 6b. My observation is that other people think we're kind of foolish and crazy for the way we do things.

Erich's choice of the Latinate intensifier *extremely* and the nominalized form *observation* invests his discourse with a formal, literate tone; additionally, as in Example 5 both examples invoke a stance of scientific objectivity and detached empiricism, here achieved through such collocations as *all the outward signs* and *My observation is*. In Example 7 Claire takes a similar stance in responding to a question from me about what term she uses for male high-school students:

- 7. Claire: I-I-I tend to-to refer to (.) the whole (.) um Y chromosome (.) as a guy.

Claire's lexical choices are formal: *tend*, *refer*. And in invoking the register of biology (*the whole (.) um Y chromosome (.)*) she participates in the same nerdy practice of scientific discourse already exemplified by Erich. The deliberateness of Claire's choice is suggested by the brief pauses that bracket and highlight the term. Like Erich, Claire understands our interaction to be a shared intellectual enterprise, and she repeatedly demonstrates her ability to engage in the scientific discourse of research. Where her use of slang in Example 3 above showed a similar linguistic self-awareness, the effect of this awareness is quite different in each case. The hesitancy in the earlier example is not in evidence here. Instead, the pauses preceding and following the phrase *Y chromosome* operate like quotation marks, not only emphasizing the term but also displaying Claire's consciousness of its markedness. Her utterance thus also illustrates the process of erasure: in highlighting her use of superstandard lexis, she implies the existence of an unmarked (standard) norm. It is at such moments that nerdiness moves from practice

to performance, a move that is partly explicable in light of Claire's identity change-in-progress.

Undoubtedly, my role as a researcher triggered this analytic style in some students, and in fact all the teenagers I interviewed engaged in style-shifting to some degree, as compared with their interactions with their friends. However, although all the teenagers I interviewed adjusted their speech to the situation, only those who engaged in other nerdy practices, and often adopted the nerd label as well, used superstandard English. Moreover, such teenagers employed this style even in interaction with their friends, a practice that I witnessed among no other teenagers.

Hyperwhiteness and the Rejection of Cool

By distancing themselves from their cool white peers, nerds at Bay City High School created an even greater distance between themselves and their cool black peers. Although nerds did not necessarily understand their linguistic and other social practices in particularly racialized terms, these practices could take on racialized meaning in the context of the ideological black-white dichotomy that shaped whiteness for European American students at Bay City High. Nerdy teenagers' deliberate avoidance of slang, for example, indexically displayed their remoteness from the trends not only of white youth culture but of black youth culture as well, since African American slang was a primary source of European American slang. While this was not necessarily an intended consequence, Example 1 provides evidence that nerds defined themselves in opposition to both coolness and blackness. Bob first utters the word *blood* (a term used by many African American boys at Bay City High) with stereotyped African American Vernacular English phonology and exaggerated intonation: [bl :d]. Her marking of AAVE speakers in this example expresses the ideological distance between her identity and that of African American youth. Her return to her normal pronunciation in the second utterance of this word ([blAd]) coincides with her attempt to provide a nonslang definition for the term. With this switch, coolness and blackness are recursively linked to each other and separated from the world of nerds.

Likewise, if the use of superstandard English worked to separate nerdy teenagers from their trendy white counterparts who generally spoke a more colloquial variety of Standard English, it also enforced a division between white nerds and most black students at Bay City High, who tended to use AAVE as their primary linguistic variety. The colloquial Standard English favored by cool white teenagers elided to some extent the structural differences between itself and AAVE (thereby allowing them a greater linguistic claim to coolness). Superstandard English, however, reinforced this racialized linguistic divide by exaggerating and highlighting the semiotic elements of Standard English that distinguish it from nonstandard forms of African American English.

Nerdy performances of intellectual ability also produced racialized difference, as suggested by Signithia Fordham's (1996) ethnographic study of academically successful students in a black high school. Fordham notes that

some high-achieving African American students were accused by their black peers of “acting white” precisely because of their intellectual performance. This charge was often accompanied by the pejorative epithet *brainiac*, a term that, as Fordham makes clear, is racialized as black in much the same way that the analogous but not synonymous term *nerd* is racialized as white (1996:361, n. 2). At its most negative, the term *brainiac* refers to an African American whose display of intellectual ability indicates a capitulation to European American cultural values. To avoid being labeled *brainiacs*, black students in Fordham’s study often hid or downplayed their academic accomplishments and demonstrated their engagement with the concerns of African American youth culture. By contrast, nerdy white teenagers at Bay City High presented themselves as fully engaged in academic endeavors and other intellectual work and showed their indifference toward the youth culture that surrounded them.⁹ Such practices constituted a counter-hegemonic erasure of the devaluation of academic achievement, but they also erased recognition of accomplished black (and white) students who chose not to openly display their abilities.

Through the use of superstandard English and the semiotic work it performed, nerds at Bay City High were classifiable not simply as white but as hyperwhite. As the most extreme form of whiteness, nerds might be expected to be the best—that is, most unmarked—example of that racial category. But it was precisely the hyperwhiteness of nerds that marked them as atypically white. In U.S. culture generally, the ideological norm of whiteness needs blackness to operate, not only to establish an Other against which to measure itself, but to provide cultural forms for whiteness to appropriate and re-racialize. As groundbreaking scholarship in other disciplines has shown (e.g., Lott 1993; Roediger 1991; Rogin 1996), whiteness is separated from blackness in ideology but inextricable from it in practice. White nerds at Bay City High violated this practice by refusing to appropriate African American cultural and linguistic forms.

Besides expressing their distance from African Americans symbolically and implicitly through linguistic and other social practices, some nerdy students also explicitly stated this ideology of identity. Thus Christine in Example 8 provides an overt statement that African American students are at best useful to know, but only as protection against other African Americans (see also Bucholtz 1999):

8. <In response to my question about whether she knows people in the “hip-hop crowd,” a term she takes to mean “black students.”>
Christine: Well I know them.
I know (.) I know some people.
Which helps to alleviate situations sometimes.

Such sentiments insert a racialized subtext into the linguistic practices and ideologies that separated nerds from African American youth language and culture. Nerds’ dismissal of black cultural practices often led them to discount the possibility of friendship with black students. In this sense, nerdy teenagers’ social freedom in rejecting normative youth identities was

constrained by their acceptance of normative, ideologically rooted views of their African American schoolmates.

The adoption of a cultural identity that could be read as hyperwhite did not guarantee, however, that nerds promoted what were viewed as “white” interests. During the time I was conducting fieldwork, a great deal of political debate in Bay City centered on the dismantling of affirmative action in California’s higher education system. Erich was among the Bay City High School students who organized large-scale protests against these measures; meanwhile, many European American students who drew heavily upon African American youth language and culture did not participate. The wholehearted, or even halfhearted, appropriation of black cultural forms did not ensure that trend-conscious white teenagers would also adopt a political perspective that was sensitive to African American concerns. By the same token, the rejection of the identity associated with trendy white youth as it emerged from and reworked African American cultural practices did not necessarily entail that nerds were similarly disengaged from the politics of race. In challenging dominant ideologies of youth culture, nerds both reinscribed and revised prevailing models of whiteness.

Conclusion

White nerds inhabited an ambiguous racial position at Bay City High: they were the whitest group but not the prototypical representatives of whiteness. It is likewise difficult to disambiguate nerds’ relationship to white domination. In refusing to exercise the racial privilege upon which white youth cultures are founded, nerds may be viewed as traitors to whiteness. But engaging in nerdy practices may itself be a form of white privilege, since these practices were not as readily available to teenagers of color and the consequences of their use more severe. The use of superstandard English is thus both a rejection of the cool white local norm and an investment in a wider institutional and cultural norm. This ambivalence toward normative practice is evident in Erich’s discourse: he uses “normal” language rather than slang, but he does not “think of anything in a normal way.” In the first use, he aligns himself with “normalness” and against trendiness; in the second use, he disaligns himself from both “normalness” and trendiness. These two valences of *normal* are akin to the two valences of whiteness in nerd identity: nerds at Bay City High were not normal because they were too normal, not (unmarkedly) white because they were too white.

In other words, the linguistic and other social practices by which nerds were culturally marked with respect to other, cooler, white students, also caused them to be racially marked with respect to both blacks and whites. While the semiotic processes of iconization, fractal recursivity, and erasure allowed nerds to challenge local ideologies based on subcultural identity, these same processes also imposed a set of racial ideologies on both nerds and their cooler counterparts, black and white. Thus although the marked hyperwhiteness of nerds undermines the racial project of whiteness as a normative and unmarked construct, it may also shore up racial ideologies of difference and division.

Notes

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1. For an updating of this model, see the introduction to this issue.

2. Although, as I discuss below, nerds and similar identities exist in other racialized groups, in this article my focus is solely on white nerds. Some of the speakers I discuss identify as Jewish to varying degrees, but while many Jews understand themselves to be racially marked by their ethnicity (Modan, this issue), hence “not quite white,” these teenagers do not discuss their ethnicity in similar terms. It appears that in the Bay City High School context ethnicity is less salient than a racialized cultural style. However, Brodtkin (1998:31) points to the pattern, early in the twentieth century, of Jewish academic achievement in higher education, “a setting where disparagement of intellectual pursuits and the gentleman C were badges of distinction.” Hence there may be a historical white ideology linking Jewishness and nerdiness, although such an ideology is not operative at Bay City High, except through ironic exploitation by Jews themselves.

3. While it may be argued that nerds participate in their own version of youth culture rather than rejecting it altogether, the practices associated with nerdiness are not primarily associated with youth nor do they perform an age-based identity in the same way as the practices associated with (dominant) youth culture.

4. All names and identifying information have been changed. Speakers chose their own pseudonyms.

5. I use the terms *superstandard* and *supercorrect* to distinguish between true hypercorrect language use (that is, use that violates a rule of descriptive grammar) and strict adherence to prescriptive grammatical rules accompanied by the use of other formal language features. As discussed below, however, hypercorrection is often part of superstandard English.

6. This kind of erasure—in which a powerful group is rendered less available to scrutiny—is not discussed by Irvine and Gal, who focus on cases of erasure in which less powerful groups are marginalized. The ideological erasure of subordinated groups also occurs at Bay City High, as for example in the racial ideology of a black-white binary, which erases the presence of Asian Americans, Latinos, and other students.

7. Transcription conventions are as follows: a period indicates falling intonation; a question mark indicates rising intonation; a comma indicates fall-rise intonation; a hyphen indicates a self-interruption that breaks the intonation unit; a dash indicates a self-interruption that breaks a word; between words, a hyphen indicates rapid speech; a (.) indicates a pause of less than one-tenth of a second; ellipsis indicates deleted text; (xxx) indicates unintelligible speech; hhh indicates laughter; angled brackets indicate transcriber comments or turns that are not the focus of analysis; and phonetic transcription appears in square brackets.

8. The resistance to assimilation processes does not, of course, have a single social meaning. In other contexts, researchers have found that some gay men may also use careful articulation (Campbell-Kibler et al. in press; Walters cited in Barrett 1997:192) without any apparent association with bookishness. In fact, it is quite unlikely that careful articulation has only a single meaning even for nerds.

9. It is important to note, however, that contrary to the claims of conservative commentators like John McWhorter (2000), African American students do not show any less enthusiasm for school—and in fact may show more—than European Americans (see Voelkl 1997).

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