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What is This?

'It's different for guys': Gendered narratives of racial conflict among white California youth

Mary Bucholtz
University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

Abstract
As race talk has gained attention throughout the social sciences, sociocultural linguistics has become crucial in revealing how racial ideologies and identities are discursively produced. This article examines how race talk may reproduce racial binaries while perpetuating gender ideologies. Drawing on ethnographically collected narratives of conflict at an ethnoracially divided California high school, the analysis examines three discursive practices of racial reversal whereby white youth portray themselves as disadvantaged vis-a-vis their black peers: claims of 'reverse discrimination', narratives of racialized fear, and fight stories. Whereas white girls' narratives relied on racial vagueness, white boys' narratives highlighted racial difference, contrastive strategies that indicate the different racial stakes for white girls versus white boys at the school. The article demonstrates the necessity of examining race talk not only for its content but also for its discursive structure, its ethnographic and interactional context, its co-construction by the researcher, and its ideological effects.

Keywords
California, ethnography, European Americans, gender, ideology, interaction, race talk, sociocultural linguistics, whiteness, youth

Introduction

Race talk, or discourse about race and ethnicity, is a key mechanism whereby the racial reasoning that upholds white privilege is propagated in everyday discourse. Previous studies show that a good deal of race talk hinges on generalized and usually negative statements about racialized categories – particularly when majority group members talk

Corresponding author:
Mary Bucholtz, Department of Linguistics, 3432 South Hall, University of California, Santa Barbara,
CA 93106–3100, USA.
Email: bucholtz@linguistics.ucsb.edu

about minority groups (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Van Dijk, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). These generalizations are often bolstered through narratives designed to illustrate or provide evidence for racial claims and complaints. Narratives lend weight to racial generalizations by offering both the authenticity of personal experience, either the narrator's own or that of one or more other identifiable individuals, and the vividness of specificity via dramatically chosen details of place, time, participants, and unfolding events. As narrative analysts have long recognized, although a narrative is typically presented as an accurate account of a past event, it is not necessarily grounded in truth, and even if it is, it may have been subject to considerable embellishment and editing. For analysts, then, the primary concern is not to confirm the accuracy of such narratives (which is generally difficult if not impossible to do) but to understand their interactional functions, such as making and supporting larger claims.

As the broad interdisciplinary field of sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall, 2008) has increasingly engaged with questions of race, it has begun to make common cause with nonlinguistic research on race talk. Sociocultural linguists have a great deal to learn from other scholars about the constitution and reproduction of race as a social construct, while researchers in other fields can benefit from the insights of linguistic approaches. From a sociocultural linguistic perspective, nonlinguistic research on race talk generally has at least three limitations: it tends to focus exclusively on discourse content, it often treats language as a direct mirror of the speaker's biography and psychology rather than a situated social production, and it typically overlooks the subtle discursive phenomena that support the workings of race and power. Moreover, both linguistic and nonlinguistic research on race talk that is not informed by ethnography risks collecting superficial or decontextualized accounts of race as well as treating racial processes in a monolithic and overdetermined fashion, thereby missing the ways that racial projects are locally specific, fragmented, and potentially unstable.

The sociocultural linguistic approach to race talk that I advocate here involves both interactional analysis and ethnography. Interactional analysis calls attention to the discursive structures that enable race talk, while ethnography highlights local meanings of race and its intersections with other social parameters, such as gender. As other articles in this special issue demonstrate, ideologies of race are intertwined with those of class, gender, sexuality, and other social identities. Analyzing how race talk is shaped by its sociocultural and interactional context reveals both the complexity and the variability of how race is discursively reproduced.

The following analysis investigates race talk among European American students at Bay City High School, a large, urban, multiracial high school in California's San Francisco Bay Area that had no racial majority; the two largest groups were African American and European American. During my ethnographic fieldwork in 1995–6, Bay City High School was widely viewed as a 'racially tense' school, with tensions particularly arising between African American and European American students. Aware of this situation, I chose not to bring up race as an explicit issue for much of my study, instead focusing my ethnographic interviews mainly on students' youth styles and friendship groups, a topic that resulted in a great deal of race talk without overt prompting. Race talk was also widespread in discussions in classrooms and peer conversations in the schoolyard. In all these contexts, white youth often claimed a position of racial disadvantage in relation

to their black peers, despite clear material evidence that they enjoyed substantial economic, educational, and structural benefits that were unavailable to African American students. It is striking that European American teenagers were so candid about discussing this highly sensitive topic in my presence, and it is important to bear in mind that my own subjectivity as a white woman, as well as my decisions as a researcher, both enabled and made me complicit in the race talk that arose, as becomes evident in the analysis below. At the same time, I would not have been able to develop the same level of trust if I had been more forceful about my own views on race at Bay City High, which often differed considerably from those of the white youth I came to know.

In my larger study (Bucholtz, 2011), I examine how white teenagers linguistically managed their identities in this 'majority minority' high school, both through the use of race talk and through the semiotic creation of racialized youth styles. While students of all stylistic orientations talked about their own whiteness in similar ways, in teenagers' discourse about racial difference, and especially blackness, variation emerged on the basis of gender as well as style. Race talk thus served as a resource for positioning the speaker in relation to locally available social categories.

Race talk and whiteness at Bay City High

White teenagers' talk about race at Bay City High School was characterized by a discourse of *racial reversal*, which runs counter to or ignores empirically observable racial asymmetries regarding material resources and structural power. Racial reversal instead asserts the racially dominant group's disadvantage vis-a-vis a racially subordinated group, often by focusing on nonstructural or individualized dynamics rather than large-scale racial processes. At Bay City High, racial reversal was manifested in three different forms: (1) expressions of white resentment of a perceived 'reverse discrimination', in which European American youth characterized themselves as oppressed by what they viewed as institutional favoritism toward people of color both at the school and nationwide; (2) tales of racialized fear and white persecution, in which white teenagers described their perception of being in danger of violence, harassment, or criminal behavior from their black peers; and (3) interracial fight stories, or narratives of physical conflict between racialized groups, which ideologically constructed a gendered racial hierarchy of physical power as opposed to structural power, in which African American males were ranked as superior to European American males.

Through these three discourse practices, white youth depicted their racial situation at Bay City High as rife with resentment, fear, and racial subordination. While these perceptions were no doubt genuinely and deeply held, they did not capture the complex reality of race at the school and in the community, where black students far more than whites confronted institutional obstacles to academic success and encountered personal threats to their physical well-being. Indeed, it appeared to me that the very real fear and frustration that European American teenagers reported in their stories about race derived not from any significant danger or discrimination that they faced but in large part from such racial narratives themselves, which were in heavy circulation among white students and powerfully shaped the discourse of race among European Americans at Bay City High School and in the larger community.

Racial resentment and the rhetoric of white disadvantage

Racial complaints did not always emerge through narratives of specific incidents. This was especially true of the ideology of reverse discrimination, which rhetorically positioned whites as institutionally disadvantaged compared to people of color. Perhaps because it was difficult for white youth to point to specific examples of reverse discrimination that they or their peers had experienced, this issue tended to be couched in more generalized statements of racial resentment. That is, although European American teenagers may not have been able to report many (or any) clear-cut cases of reverse discrimination, they nonetheless presented themselves as its victims.

White youths' ideology of reverse discrimination reconfigured the official racial discourse at Bay City High, which emphasized respect for ethnoracial difference and the celebration of multicultural diversity. This multicultural discourse heavily informed the school's curriculum, from units on race and ethnicity in English and history classes to courses on ethnoracial themes, including the school's controversial Multiculturalism class. Ironically, given its aims, this course in particular was the cause of considerable grievance among European American students, many of whom felt that the class portrayed whites as racial oppressors and thus licensed students of color to treat their white peers with open hostility. In Example (1), Claire and Christine, both European American girls, express their scorn for Bay City High's multicultural discourse of respect, and Claire goes on to suggest that the school's rhetoric is hypocritical given her own experience in the Multiculturalism class. (Transcription conventions appear in the Appendix.)

(1)

```
 1   Claire:      It's so like,
 2   Christine:   <sniff>
 3   Claire:      'We a:ll got to show each other respect.'
 4                It's like,
 5                'Yeah well,
 6                you should be doing that [₁anyway.₁]
 7   Christine:                            [₁<sniff>₁]
 8   Claire:      We don't need to,
 9                make a big,
10                deal: out of it.
11                We shouldn't make [₂people go and,₂]'
12   Christine:                     [₂A big politi₂cal campai:gn,
13                a[₃bout giving people re₃]spect,
14   Claire:       [₃I kno::w.         ₃]
15   Christine:   it's [₄like,    ₄]
16   Claire:           [₄It's like,₄]
17                <whisper> {Multi[₅culturalism,
18                                              oh my₅] go:d,
19   Christine:                    [₅'Why don't you just,
20                                              do it.'₅]
21   Claire:      Teach people how to hate white kids.
```

22   Mary: Oh yeah?
23   Claire: I'm really <u>bitter</u> about [₆that class.₆]
24   Mary: [₆@@@   ₆]

The girls' complaints about the school's discourse of multiculturalism are framed not as specific narratives but as a series of typifications (Agha, 2007) and assessments of a general state of affairs. Thus, Claire introduces the quoted speech in line 3 with a structure that marks it as a general characterization (*it's so like*; line 1) rather than a quotation tied to a specific episode or speaker. This typifying utterance is in turn negatively assessed via quoted speech (lines 4–6, 8–11; 15 and 19–20). Similarly, in line 17, Claire introduces the topic of the Multiculturalism class without either characterizing it or offering an explicit assessment, although her whispered voice quality and use of the affective marker *oh my go:d* (line 18) point up the dramatic significance of this topic. She then provides a general characterization of the Multiculturalism class (line 21), followed by a negative assessment (line 23). Like many other white students at Bay City High, Claire and Christine view the explicitly multicultural discourse at the school as overblown (lines 8–10, 12), as more talk than action (lines 6, 19–20), and as coercive (line 11). It appears to be this last issue that leads Claire to bring up the Multiculturalism class, which in her view exposes the school's discourse of respect as both inappropriate and hypocritical.

The complaints of reverse discrimination in my data, then, were not narratives of specific instances of institutional favoritism against white youth but vague general characterizations and typifications. It appeared that because the discourse of white disadvantage was so firmly entrenched among many European American students, such assertions did not require explanation or supporting evidence. And even when I encouraged students to elaborate further, as in Example (1) above when I responded to Claire's complaint about the Multiculturalism class with the question *Oh yeah?* (line 22), this yielded little in the way of detailed illustrations of claims of discrimination. While I have no doubt that these girls and many other white students did indeed feel uncomfortable, even targeted, in Bay City High's classes on multicultural issues, specific instances of such moments are not reported in my data.

Narratives of racial fear

Like the discourse of reverse discrimination, the rhetoric of racial fear, which was perhaps even more widespread among European American youth at the school, similarly positioned whites as subordinate to and oppressed by blacks. The discourse of fear relied on a racial ideology of white vulnerability to black violence that legitimated white students' perception that they were in physical peril (Armour, 1997). Yet, as with the discourse of reverse discrimination, while I frequently spoke with European American teenagers who expressed genuine fear of their African American peers, their talk about this anxiety was rarely grounded in specific instances of personal experience. Moreover, when specific stories of interracial conflict did occur, they were more often about perceived close calls and verbal confrontations rather than actual incidents of black-on-white violence.

In my data, the rhetoric of racial danger often interacts with the ideology of colorblindness, according to which talk about race is itself considered racist (Pollock, 2005). Consequently, racial others are not always straightforwardly labeled as such in white students' discourse about race. In this way, the race talk in this study sometimes differs from that documented by many other researchers, in which racial labels are extremely overt and often abusive (e.g. Stokoe and Edwards, 2007); recognizing when speakers' talk is specifically about race may therefore require ethnographic knowledge beyond the interaction itself. Yet if blackness often goes unnamed in these narratives, whiteness is frequently mentioned, a reversal of the general European American perception of blackness as marked and hence nameable and whiteness as unmarked and hence unmentioned (cf. Trechter and Bucholtz, 2001; Whitehead and Lerner, 2009). At the same time, European American teenagers' narratives of a perceived racialized threat often assert the value of forming friendly acquaintanceships with African American youth as a means of protection from interracial conflict. Example (2) illustrates these characteristics of European American teenagers' narratives of racial fear. The example takes place as I asked students about specific terms for groups and activities at Bay City High. Here the term *hip hop* is under discussion. In response to a question from me about whether she knows people in the 'hip hop crowd', Christine, who is in her third year of high school, links the term to her own past experiences of being harassed as a first-year student, or freshman.

(2)

1	Mary:	So you don't,
2		n-
3		kn<u>o</u>w people that,
4		would be <u>i</u>n something c<u>a</u>lled a hip hop crowd,=
5		=or you wouldn't [₁ use a term like that? ₁]
6	Christine:	\<higher pitch\> [₁ {Oh,
7		I kn<u>o</u>:w them.} ₁]
8		I know,
9		I kn<u>o</u>w some people.
10		(0.8)
11		Which helps alleviate situations so@me↑@times,
12		B@ut,
13	Mary:	↑Hm.
14	Christine:	they're not like my f:ri<u>e</u>:n:ds.
15	Mary:	What do you mea-
16		it helps alleviate situations?
17	Christine:	Oh,
18		<u>I</u> don't know.
19		Like,
20		I-
21		I've,
22		N:ot so much r<u>e</u>cently,
23		but,
24		especially <u>f</u>reshman year,
25		I found that like,

```
26                      I got picked o:n,
27                      because,
28                      you know,
29                      I'm a li-
30                      <higher pitch> {small white girl.}
31      Mary:           [₂Mm.₂]
32      Christine:      [₂And ₂] it's like,
33                      sometimes,
34                      if I knew s-
35                      if I know somebody in the crowd,
36                      I'll be like,
37                      'Oh,
38                          ↑hi:!'
39      Mary:           [₃Mm.        ₃]
40      Christine:      [₃(And they'll – )₃]
41                      You know,
42                      it'll be oka:y.=
43      Mary:                      =[₄Mm.₄]
44      Christine:                 =[₄If I ₄] know,
45                      <sniff>
46                      (0.5)
47                      If I know them they don't p@ick o@n me@[₅@@,₅]
48      Mary:                                                  [₅Hm. ₅]
49      Christine:      for @one thing.
```

Christine relies on referential vagueness in this example (e.g. *them*, lines 7, 47; *some people*, line 9) and does not need to explicitly name the racial category of blackness in order to be understood by me and her friend Claire. To begin with, although she does not racially identify the 'hip hop crowd', at Bay City High School this label generally indexed African American youth or those who emulated their style (see also Hill, 2009: 52–3, cited in Alim, 2011). Moreover, Christine's racialized description of herself as a 'small white girl' (line 30) makes plain to her listeners that it is African Americans to whom she is referring with vague terms like *they* and *somebody*. This interpretation is based on two key details of the local ethnographic situation. First, because blacks and whites were the school's two largest and – to white youth – most salient groups, for a white speaker to invoke whiteness usually implied the relevance of blackness. Second, because many European American students held ideologies that black-on-white aggression was commonplace at Bay City High, a European American teenager's mention of specifically white victimization generally implied a black perpetrator unless stated otherwise. In this way, Christine adheres to the discourse of colorblindness even as she signals to her audience the racial dimension of her talk. To discover the meaning of Christine's talk, then, it is necessary to combine the techniques of interactional analysis with ethnographic observation.

Christine displays a similar reticence regarding the topic of racialized conflict itself. She herself raises the issue in discussing the 'hip hop crowd', but she again does so in vague terms (*I know some people. (0.8) Which helps alleviate situations so@me↑@ times*; lines 9–11). Moreover, laughter tokens are embedded in the final part of

her utterance; in the context of talk about troubles, laughter is often a display that the problem the speaker has brought up is not a serious concern, or at least that she has the situation under control (Jefferson, 1984). Likewise, when I ask Christine to elaborate on this remark, she hedges repeatedly before doing so and emphasizes that the incidents in question mainly occurred two years earlier (lines 22–4). Nor is the narrative that she produces highly detailed. Instead, she uses generalization to typify rather than specify the situation she is reporting, and she continues to linguistically obscure the identity of her antagonists, in this case by using an agentless passive (*I found that like, I got picked o:n*; lines 25–6). But although Christine draws on a number of linguistic devices to downplay the difficulties she has experienced as a 'small white girl', in the middle of her discourse she abruptly switches from the generalized past to the generalized present, thus implying that the situation has not entirely abated (lines 34–5: *if I knew s- if I know somebody in the crowd*).

Like Christine's racial interpretation of *hip hop crowd*, in Example (3) below the phrase *watch your back* is similarly reinterpreted in (implicitly) racialized terms by two other European American girls, Zoe and Josie. *Watch your back* may be either a threatening warning or a positive expression used by students engaged in African American youth culture as part of a social code in which friends are expected to look out for one another – that is, to watch one another's backs. These girls, however, took the phrase as quite literal advice to 'watch your backpack'. This interpretation launched a series of narratives about thefts from backpacks that occurred as students moved through the school's crowded hallways; Example (3) is the third in this series. The girls viewed such incidents as expectable rather than exceptional, but they also considered them significant criminal acts. As Josie asserted in initiating the narrative sequence, 'There is organized crime at Bay City High'; by this she meant that two or more students sometimes collaborated to engage in petty theft. I have no evidence of such occurrences being commonplace, apart from often-retold stories by these and some other students. I myself never had anything stolen from my own backpack, despite my frequent failure to heed warnings from European American students and teachers about the perils of leaving my backpack unzipped or unattended.

(3)

1	Zoe:	Also one time I was walking with my friends to math class?
2		And this guy:,
3		like,
4		h:e was,
5		on my-
6		on my:,
7		(1.0)
8		Anyways,
9		he was like on the right side I guess?
10		And so he started walki:ng,
11		like,
12		to the left,
13		like,
14		sort of like,

15		pushing me o:ver,
16		and I (was like,)
17		<breathy> 'Ah!'
18		you know?
19	Mary:	Wo[₁:w. ₁]
20	Zoe:	[₁Um-₁]
21		and,
22		and,
23		the –
24		like,
25		this guy that we were walking with,
26		like we know him and stuff?
27		And,
28		'cause he kn:ew.
29		Like,
30		h:e realized that someone was behind us.
31		And he –
32		he said later,
33		he was like,
34		'Yea:h,
35		I was afraid they were going to do something to me.'
36		But I was totally oblivious.
37	Mary:	[₂Mm. ₂]
38	Zoe:	[₂So like,₂]
39		I: don't know.
40		I think it's different for,
41		guys:,
42		<lower volume> {also.}
43		[₃A little more.₃]
44	Mary:	[₃Oh really?
45		In₃] what sense?
46	Zoe:	It's,
47		like,
48		more intense for them,
49		I,
50		guess.
51	Mary:	[₄Hm. ₄]
52	Zoe:	[₄Because,₄]
53		I mean,
54		he was so awa:re.
55		Li:ke,
56		he was just,
57		Like [₅I was- ₅]=
58	Mary:	[₅Wo:w. ₅]=
59	Zoe:	=[₆I was just₆]=
60	Mary:	=[₆Why? ₆]=
61	Zoe:	=[₇wa:lking to cla:ss, ₇]=
62	Mary:	=[₇That-
63		that seems like ₇]=

```
64    Zoe:     =[₈I was totally oblivious – ₈]
65    Mary:    =[₈ it's the opposite.        ₈]
66    Zoe:     Yeah.
67             Well like for w-
68             (1.0)
69             Yea:h.
70             I don't know.
71             For a white,
72             guy?
73             I don't know.
74             [₉I think so.₉]
75    Mary:    [₉Oh really?₉]
```

As in Example (2) above, Zoe's narrative uses referential vagueness to bring up an instance of racial danger without naming the racial other. Thus, the supposedly threatening student is referred to only as *this guy:* (line 2), remaining otherwise undescribed. It is only when Zoe – albeit with numerous hesitation markers – specifies the racial category of her friend (lines 67–72) at the very end of the discussion that race enters into the discourse. Yet for all participants race is salient from the very beginning of the series of narratives, given the topic of danger and theft that unites these stories and the white ideology of black students as the source of such perils; once again, ethnographic knowledge must be combined with interactional analysis to appreciate the full import of the narrative.

As with many of the narratives of racial danger that I heard from European American teenagers, no overt threat ever emerges in Zoe's story; what constructs the episode as dangerous is the white participants' evaluation that it was. These evaluations occur via quoted thought and speech, which help recreate the emotion experienced in the narrated moment. Zoe reports that when she realizes that another student is menacing her, she reacts in alarm (lines 16–17), and she quotes her friend as saying, 'I was afraid they were going to do something to me' (line 35). Yet the details she provides make it difficult to confirm the interpretation that she and her friend were in imminent danger. Given the overcrowding at Bay City High School, jostling in the hallways was a regular occurrence, as was being closely followed by other students, and thus another person's mere proximity could not be sufficient to establish criminal intent. To be sure, a few teenagers of any race or ethnicity might take advantage of this situation to grab a wallet out of an easily accessible backpack. Nevertheless, European American youth at Bay City High, especially when in close physical contact with their African American peers, tended to have a much stronger perception of danger than the facts generally seemed to warrant.

This perception was fostered by white teenagers' recounting of stories of racial danger, of which Zoe's narrative is one example. What made such stories tellable was the potential threat they narrated, and thus details that emphasized this threat were important to include. Indeed, in several places in Zoe's narrative, details are added that enhance the drama of the narrative but do not fully cohere. Is the 'someone … behind us' (line 30) the original purported aggressor or instead a second antagonist, as perhaps implied by Zoe's quoted speech of her friend? And given Zoe's own reported realization of a potential threat in lines 16 and 17, why does she later state that she 'was totally oblivious' (line 64)

and characterize herself, in contrast to her friend, as 'just wa:lking to cla:ss' unaware of any danger (lines 59, 61)? Whatever the resolution to these puzzles, it is clear that her reframing of the narrative from a shared experience of racial fear to one undergone only by her male friend allows her to introduce an important rhetorical point: 'it's different for, guys:' (lines 40–1). She develops this point by characterizing herself as unaware and her male friend as hyperaware of an impending danger from a (presumably) African American boy. When in response I express surprise, grounded in my own feminist perspective, that a male might be more attuned to potential physical danger than a female, Zoe specifies that it is particularly 'for a white, guy' (lines 71–2) that such situations are so 'intense' (line 48). Her narrative thus reproduces an ideology of not only racialized but also gendered fear of African American students among European American youth at Bay City High.

The notion that racial conflict was different for boys than for girls was not unusual at the school, and indeed, all of the stories I heard about actual interracial violence (as well as many stories of potential violence) were told by boys. In such narratives, ideologies of race once again intermingled with ideologies of gender, as white male narrators ranked themselves against boys of other races and ethnicities within a hierarchy of masculinity based on physical strength. In foregrounding physical power over the structural power that endows whiteness with its hegemony, such narratives once again performed a rhetorical reversal of the relative power of black and white youth at Bay City High School.

Ideologies of masculinity in narratives of interracial violence

Despite white teenagers' frequent expressions of fear of victimization by a black aggressor, physical fights and other forms of confrontation between Bay City High School's students were far more often intraracial than interracial (see also Shuman, 1986). Indeed, it may have been precisely their rarity that made episodes of interracial conflict especially tellable. Girls' racial narratives, like those of Christine and Zoe above, focused on verbal confrontation or a vague sense of danger. By contrast, in some boys' narratives about race, actual violence figured far more centrally. In such narratives, the ideology that 'it's different for guys' found ample illustration. This difference was due in part to many white boys' perception that they were targets of black male violence. Moreover, for many boys, being able to fight was tied to an ideology of masculinity as physically powerful. That is, fighting was a way to secure a reputation as normatively masculine, while failing to fight or being ignominiously defeated by an opponent could raise questions about one's masculinity. Hence, male narrators' stories of physical conflict with boys from other racialized groups involved ideologies not only of race but also of gender.

Scholarship on hegemonic masculinity has demonstrated that although the power of middle-class masculinity is institutionally secured and does not rely on physical strength, physicality continues to be one measure of masculine power (e.g. Connell, 1995; Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Kiesling, 1997). Physical strength may be associated in particular with working-class styles of masculinity rather than with the politically and economically dominant middle class (Connell, 1995; Willis, 1977). In addition, physical masculinity is also often racialized, as seen in the longstanding cultural ideology of black masculinity as hyperphysical and hyperviolent (Collins, 2005; Ferguson, 2000; Jackson,

2006), which is grounded in white exploitation of black labor, first through slavery and later through low-wage, physically demanding jobs. A complementary ideology positions Asian masculinity as physically deficient due to complex political and economic factors in US immigration history (Eng, 2000; Espiritu, 1997; Shek, 2006). These ideologies participate in a dominant cultural system of gendered racial logic that upholds white masculinity as normative, even as it is positioned in some local contexts, especially among youth, as physically inferior to black masculinity (Staiger, 2006).

European American boys at Bay City High School drew on these ideologies to construct themselves as occupying an intermediate, 'ordinary' (Sacks, 1984) position within a racial hierarchy of masculinity. Their fight stories invoked this ideological hierarchy in several ways: through overt racial references; through physical descriptions of African American men and boys; and through evaluations of the relative physical prowess of other racialized males, which complicated but did not disrupt the black–white binary that dominated most race talk at the school. Due to space limitations, I focus here on the first of these practices (see Bucholtz, 2011 for a discussion of all three practices).

Racial labels

In contrast to the colorblind strategies in most other race talk I recorded at Bay City High, including delayed, implied, or hedged references to race, boys' interracial fight stories introduced the race of combatants early on and did so in a direct, on-record way, without hedging or disfluency. Given the ideological importance of the racial hierarchy of masculinity in such stories, it was crucial for the narrator to establish the race of the combatants right away in order to lay the groundwork for an account of any physical shortcomings that might be attributed to him based on the narrated events.

The examples in (4) are the openings of three different fight stories. Example (4a) is the beginning of a narrative about an African American student's attempt to steal from the narrator's backpack, a theme also found in the stories by Josie and Zoe discussed above. Example (4b) comes from a series of stories about interracial fights, and Example (4c) initiates a narrative that was offered as an illustration of how 'real friends', as opposed to 'so-called friends', provide support in difficult situations. The first two narrators, Brand One and Mr Frisky, are white; Brand One is also Jewish. The third narrator, Nico Caen, self-identifies as Puerto Rican, but due to his blond hair, blue eyes, and pale skin he was often viewed as white at Bay City High. Although he did not consider himself white, I include his narrative here because his apparent whiteness is made relevant later in his story (Bucholtz, 2011).

(4a)

1	Brand One:	two months ago this du:de,
2		um,
3		(1.5)
4		<tongue click>
5		I was walking up to u:h,
6		to:,
7		the bus stop,

8		and he –
9		and he was in my backpack right?
10		This,
11		this black dude was like s:ix,
12		maybe like,
13		fi:ve ten,
14		he was big,
15		he was a lot bigger than me, …

(4b)

1	Mr Frisky:	Tim was talking shit,
2		a:nd
3		suddenly,
4		it seemed,
5		<higher pitch> {out of the woodwork,}
6		once agai:n,
7		the uh,
8		@
9		you know,
10		suddenly about fifty to,
11		you know,
12		sixty,
13		bl:ack kids suddenly swarm after him.

(4c)

1	Nico Caen:	Over in the Park,
2		like,
3		beginning of this year,
4		we uh:,
5		<[tʃ]>
6		some little Asian fools tried to start,
7		f:unk with me and my friend,
8		just two of us,
9		and like thirty of them,
10		you know?

Racial labels occur early in each narrative (4a, line 11: *this black dude*; 4b, lines 10–13: *fifty to . . . sixty, bl:ack kids*; 4c, line 6: *some little Asian fools*); in Examples (4b) and (4c) such a label is the first mention of the antagonist. Nor is the production of racial labels marked by indicators of interactional trouble as seen in earlier examples. To be sure, some disfluency occurs in these examples, but compared to the colorblind discourse analyzed previously, in which racial labels are elaborately avoided or delayed, here the labels are produced relatively early and easily. By mentioning race, and mentioning it at the very beginning of their narratives, these speakers put their audience on notice that the story they are about to hear has a specifically racial meaning.

The topicalization of race in stories of violence is not specific to this ethnographic context but is a generally recognized characteristic of race talk. For example, Teun van

Dijk (1987: 73) reports that 'aggression, violence, menacing behavior, and fights' were by far the most common topic raised by white speakers in the Netherlands when discussing racial minorities. And beyond the practice of racial labeling itself, speakers use a broad range of rhetorical strategies to represent antagonists of other races within fight narratives. Such strategies are designed both to enhance listeners' interest in the narrative and to recruit the audience to align with the narrator's evaluation of the story. In the present data, the point of all these stories is similar: to recount an exciting event, in which the narrator or his friend, or both, faced considerable physical danger from one or more adversaries of another race. In so doing, however, these boys also use various resources to present themselves as adequately masculine to face and pass this challenge either through physical prowess or other means.

To make a fight story tellable, narrators must establish that they (or the narrative's protagonist) faced a formidable opponent. Thus, in Example (4a) Brand One highlights the size of his adversary: *this bl<u>a</u>ck dude was like s:ix, maybe like, fi:ve ten, he was b<u>i</u>g, he was a l<u>o</u>t bigger than me* (lines 11–15). The other two boys foreground (and no doubt inflate) their opponents' superior numbers (Example 4b, lines 10–13: *about fifty to, you know, s<u>i</u>xty, bl:<u>a</u>ck kids suddenly sw<u>a</u>rm after him*; Example 4c, lines 8–9: *just tw<u>o</u> of us, and like th<u>i</u>rty of them*). In all three cases, mention of race occurs in close juxtaposition with mention of the antagonists' attributes. Again, such descriptions are typical of race talk more generally (and especially overtly racist discourse). Indeed, the putative physical threat represented by African American men is such a frequent trope of white racial discourse that it has been dubbed the 'Big Black Man Syndrome' (Vogelman, 1993), and the description of people of color in Example (4b) as 'swarm[ing]' (line 13) and other imagery of vermin (*out of the w<u>oo</u>dwork*; line 5) is commonplace in xenophobic and racist diatribes (Santa Ana, 2002), although it does not appear that the narrator intends these associations.

These narratives draw on both racial and gender ideologies. For example, where narrators may attribute superior numbers to either African American or Asian American antagonists, they attribute superior size and strength only to the former group. This is illustrated in line 6 of Example (4c), where Nico Caen describes his opponents as *little <u>A</u>sian fools* (*fools* here does not impugn the intelligence of those to whom it refers but serves as a generic term like *guys* or *dudes*). Although the term *little* here may be less a reference to the physical size of Nico's adversaries and more a trivializing assessment of the level of threat they presented, it is unlikely that such a term would have been used if Nico had viewed them as physically imposing. Through these racial references to antagonists in stories of interracial conflict, narrators construct a racialized hierarchy of masculinities, with African Americans at the top and – for non-Asian American narrators – Asian Americans at the bottom (cf. Chun, 2001).

In such narratives, blackness acquires 'situational dominance' that nonetheless upholds gender ideologies (Alim et al., 2010). By denying their own physical power in relation to African American boys, white boys (as well as other nonblack boys) could claim to be racially subordinated to their black schoolmates. Moreover, this situational dominance constitutes a form of rhetorical reversal. Not only do these narratives displace structural power in favor of physical power but they also disregard the actual conditions

of physical danger at the school and in the larger community, where black boys rarely posed a threat to white boys but were often victims of violence themselves.

As shown in the foregoing examples, at Bay City High School the white ideology of racial reversal was reproduced through gendered narratives of race-based discrimination, fear, and physical conflict. White teenagers' discourse strategies of racial reversal consistently inverted the structural distribution of power between whiteness and blackness by claiming whiteness as a racial disadvantage. This strategy may have appeared to dismantle the conventional system of racialized inequality, but in fact it shored up this system by elevating African American teenagers to the apex of the racial order on the basis of perceived physical power but not political or economic power. White students' narratives of racial conflict often quite explicitly constructed racial hierarchies in which African American boys in particular were figured as admirably powerful yet alarmingly dangerous. These strategies reflected the students' embeddedness within larger American discourses of race, but they were also tied to these teenagers' specific location in a region of the United States and in a particular high school in which they were not members of the racial majority.

Conclusion

There is no question that European American teenagers at Bay City High often experienced themselves as beleaguered and oppressed by African Americans at the school, despite the objective reality that it was white students and not their black peers who enjoyed considerable advantages due to their racial category. As a white researcher, I was no doubt perceived as sympathetic to the racial complaints and narratives I heard, and I could understand if not share the very real fears, resentments, and anxieties that European American youth confided to me, even as I noted discrepancies between their perceptions and my own observations of race and power at Bay City High. It would be both simplistic and unproductive to dismiss white students' statements as symptoms of individual racism or other moral failings, for these statements were entirely predictable consequences of the contemporary racial situation in the USA, in which, despite ongoing racial injustice, those with the greatest degree of racial privilege often experience themselves as disadvantaged. Widespread discourses of reverse discrimination and reverse racism made it almost inevitable that even these relatively liberal European American youth, living in the politically progressive San Francisco Bay Area, would take up such discourses in making sense of the local racial order of Bay City High School, which they negotiated every day. The findings of this study also suggest that multicultural curricula intended to foster respect and understanding between racialized groups may end up unwittingly reinforcing ethnoracial divisions, perhaps in part because they do not explicitly address ideologies such as colorblindness and racial reversal that dominate white racial discourse in the USA (see also Pollock, 2005).

Just as educators must acknowledge their own and their students' embeddedness in racial ideologies, it is equally impossible for researchers to stand apart from the racial systems we analyze. As the data repeatedly demonstrate, my own uncritical responses to students' narratives made me complicit in their racial discourses. My collusion in and

co-construction of race talk in these ethnographic interviews and in the larger ethnographic study point to the importance of examining the subjectivity of the researcher as well as participants in studies of racial identity. At the same time, studying race talk without ethnography runs its own risks: holding the researcher's own racial subjectivity at a remove, treating race talk according to preconceived theories, dismissing speakers as 'racists' without seeking to make sense of their viewpoints, overlooking the ways in which race talk is inextricably tied to the local context in which it is produced. Studies of race talk must begin on the ground, in the complex lives and experiences and perspectives of those whose discourse we seek to understand.

To get at the issues that arise in racial discourse, then, researchers would do well to take the interdisciplinary, multi-method approach of sociocultural linguistics, which allows for the examination of discourse content as well as the details of linguistic and interactional structure, in addition to consideration of context at multiple levels: the immediate level of the social interaction, the local level of the ethnographic situation, and the broader social, cultural, and political levels that inform and are shaped by each instance of race talk. It is only by combining all these tools and perspectives, in dialogue with researchers offering complementary approaches, that the workings of race talk can be exposed, interrogated, and ultimately undone.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

All names in transcripts are pseudonyms. Each line represents a single intonation unit.

.	falling intonation
,	fall–rise intonation
?	rising intonation

!	raised pitch and volume throughout the intonation unit
↑	pitch accent
<u>underline</u>	emphatic stress; increased amplitude; careful articulation
:	length
=	latching; no pause between intonation units
–	self-interruption; break in the intonation unit
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
(n.n)	measured pause of greater than 0.5 seconds
@	laughter; each token marks one pulse
[⌐]	overlapping speech in proximity to another overlap
( )	uncertain transcription
< >	transcriber comment; nonvocal noise
{ }	stretch of talk to which transcriber comment applies
<[ ]>	phonetic transcription
‘ ’	reported speech or thought
…	omitted material

Mary Bucholtz is a professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of California, Santa Barbara. A specialist in sociocultural linguistics, she conducts research on language, identity, and ideology, with a particular focus on race, gender, and style among youth. In addition to numerous articles and book chapters on these issues, she is the coeditor of several volumes on language, gender, and sexuality as well as the author of *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).