White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity, by Mary Bucholtz. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 296 pp. ISBN 978-0521871495. (Reviewed by Ashley Patterson[1])

Race and racial identification have long been and continue to be devices of separation in American society. One's racial affiliation is expected to determine characteristics such as language use, stylistic choices, and ways one engages in the act of being a student. Definitions of what it means to be a student involve intellect, educability, and upward mobility—all traits that are also linked to race in the American psyche. Hegemonic ideologies that centralize Whiteness and present Whiteness as the norm deemphasize—or completely deny—the fact that Whiteness is itself a racial culture. In her book, Bucholtz challenges assumptions that consider Whiteness to be the given standard from which all other cultures differ. She seeks to build an understanding of Whiteness as a social construction, as is any race, through analysis of the languages used and styles enacted by White students at a San Francisco Bay Area High School.

While the word *literacy* is not found in her title, nor is it a highlighted theoretical feature of her introductory chapter, it can be argued that literacy is, still, at the core of Bucholtz's work. Bucholtz gets at the racial underpinnings of literacies in which her White study participants engage; those literacies are grounded in discourses of Whiteness. As fellow linguist Gee (1989) explains, a useful and accurate understanding of a definition of the term *literacy* necessarily relates to an understanding of the term *discourse*. Gee explains discourse as the cultural practices that regulate one's thoughts, speech and actions in a way that allows one to "do" a certain role (e.g., a White teenager, a preppy teenager, a nerdy teenager, etc.) and that simultaneously allows others to interpret those communicative actions as recognizable performances of that role. Gee argues further that people acquire primary discourses through the ways in which they are "encultured" to make sense of the world, but that they have to develop, through practice, secondary discourses, which are those that allow them to communicate or perform roles recognized or accepted by those with whom they interact in settings outside of their primary communities. Given these ideas about discourse, Gee then defines literacy as "control of uses of language in secondary discourses" (p. 6). Each of the participants in Bucholtz's study are engaging in discourses outside of their primary, home discourse—thus secondary discourses—and her work is focused on understanding the ways in which they masterfully do so while in the process of identifying themselves in and by way of those discourses at the same time. Though literacy is not the term that the author employs, Bucholtz's work is no less important to studies of discourse, literacies, and educational sociolinguistics.

Bucholtz completed her ethnographic study in the mid-1990s and utilizes a sociocultural linguistic theoretical frame for data analysis. Her overarching argument is that racial identity and style can be witnessed and tracked through a

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multifaceted look at the language choices that are made by speakers adhering to particular identities and styles. Across eight chapters, Bucholtz first analyzes the stylistic symbols by which White students at Bay City High School develop and enact identities that she categorizes as preppy mainstream, White hip hop fans, and nerd styles. She then considers communication practices that White students utilize when discussing race in general and Whiteness in particular. Bucholtz has sifted through what is undoubtedly a tremendous bank of artifacts, recordings, and field notes to present a clear, succinct and readily consumable narrative chronicling a brief period in the performance of identities and styles of White students at Bay City High School.

Bucholtz argues that an approach to thinking more about racially based issues of youth identity that is founded in sociocultural linguistics "offers a largely untapped resource for nonlinguistic scholars concerned with racial power and identities to examine how race is built on the everyday ground of discourse and interaction" (p. 15). Her work throughout the book supports this assertion as she explains technical aspects of linguistic concepts in ways that are accessible to nonlinguistic readers and, in doing so, clearly identifies the relationship between these concepts and the development of discourses of Whiteness. In her analysis of the racial discourse of her study participants, Bucholtz highlights both what was said and how it was said. She also applies the tenets of interactional analysis, "which view spontaneous spoken language as the machinery that produces the social world moment by moment" (p. 7). The varied performances of Whiteness and racialized linguistic practice were captured in "words, pronunciations, and grammatical structures as symbols of social meaning," an approach that allowed her to focus on how students *"did" Whiteness* instead of how they *were White* (p. 8). Bucholtz is effective in her approach, as witnessed by the convincing portrayals of students identifying with three different styles of Whiteness.

Bucholtz's treatment of Whiteness and White identities is part of a fairly new component of racial studies. As the author notes, Whiteness has been presented as hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971), invisible (Dyer, 1997), and a lack of culture (Frankenberg, 1993; Perry, 2001). Each of these explanations falls short of fully entering Whiteness into the larger discussion of race, as none of them acknowledges the fact that the concept of Whiteness, along with all other concepts of race, is a social construction. Bucholtz offers several less restrictive presentations of Whiteness including that it is situated and situational, and that it is multiple in that it coexists with other identities, including those related to class, gender, and sexuality, among others. Using a working definition of identity that describes it as "the social positioning of self and other," she utilizes these complex, problematized frames of Whiteness in her analysis (p. 2). While she tackles issues around Whiteness that few other researchers are currently attempting to dismantle, she falls short in giving importance to the broader racial contexts within which her observations were set.

In her setup of the description of Bay City High School, Bucholtz explains the tenuous relationship shared between Blacks and Whites at the school and notes that

much of the tension was born of perceptions that had no foundation in actuality. This gives the reader an impression of a critical theory-based approach to her work. However, particularly in Chapters 8–10 that discuss how Bay City's White teenagers engage in racially-based discourses, Bucholtz fails to take up several opportunities to further this trajectory. When labeling themselves, some of the students made comments such as, "I'm white, but I don't really identify with my race" (p. 210). The author does not examine such statements from the angle that such a standpoint emphasizes the position of privilege that White students at the school enjoyed, though the statement above and several others like it seem to beg such a treatment. One of the topics that sparked the students to engage in conversation about race was their mandatory participation in a multicultural class. Some of the comments made about the class included one student saying, "Multiculturalism … Teach people how to hate white kids … I'm really bitter about that class," and another asserting that it "was hell for me" (pp. 191, 192). While Bucholtz briefly presents positive experiences by African-American students in the class as well, she does not do much more with the aforementioned statements than to offer them as examples of the reverse-discrimination discourse in which many Bay City students engaged. Further, the race of the multicultural class teacher, an African-American male, was specifically named, though structural and societal issues around the fact that a minority would be assigned to such a position were not noted. To be fair, Bucholtz expresses the discomfort she felt both in bringing up topics of race given the strained racial climate of the school, and in having to hold back her personal ideas about race that often conflicted with the students' observations, in the name of staying true to her stance as an ethnographic researcher. The analysis Bucholtz provides post-data collection unfortunately still does not succeed in sufficiently contextualizing or problematizing some of the more troubling beliefs about race that were communicated. Given the tumultuous history between Blacks and Whites in the United States that continues to shape race relations today, it does not seem that any discourse about race in America can be complete without a clear grounding in this sociohistorical context.

As just indicated, the duty of the ethnographer to not remove him or herself from the work while also not unduly influencing the study participants is not forgotten by Bucholtz. When appropriate, throughout the book, the author reminds the reader of her potential biases as a White female observing and writing about White teenagers while making a concerted effort not to cloud her data by pushing her own antiracist ideals onto them. She makes references to decisions she made as a graduate student that she continues to question almost two decades later. This self-awareness as a researcher serves to make the information shared ever more visible for the reader, as it highlights the humanity that is the subject of the work.

In another reflection on the past, Bucholtz dedicates a few of the final pages of her book to noting how times have changed since her observations made in the 1990s. She cites the changing racial demographics in California and the US, which have seen Latinos outnumber African-Americans as the largest minority population, and the election of President Obama as signs that we live in a new time. Her commentary, however, again does not do enough in acknowledging that racial

identity is itself an ever-changing process, and is even more dynamic given contextual backgrounds that are also in constant flux. Irrespective of this somewhat underwhelming conclusion, Bucholtz's study is overall a fresh, entertaining, and linguistically thought-provoking approach to examining the development of White youth identity and style that will hopefully help to shape the future of racial understanding in America.

References

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