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# **“OH NO! I’M A NERD!”**

## **Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum**

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*In this article, the author presents findings based on her research on BlueSky, an online interactive text-based forum. She discusses BlueSky participants’ online performances of gendered and raced identities. Participants interpret their own and others’ identities within the context of expectations and assumptions derived from offline U.S. culture, as well as from their membership in various computer-related subcultures. Given the predominance of white men on BlueSky, such identity interpretations also rely on expectations concerning masculinity and whiteness. The author explores BlueSky participants’ understandings of themselves as “nerds” and considers the implications of this nerd identity for their relationship to hegemonic masculinity, especially to expectations of heterosexuality. Analyzing online identity performances in this way provides information pertaining not just to online interaction but to a better understanding of the social construction of gendered and raced identities more generally.*

Every day, on an online forum called BlueSky,<sup>1</sup> a group of young people gather to chat, joke with each other, exchange work-related information, and “hang out.” Starting at around 10:00 a.m. Pacific time and ending very late at night, people enter and leave the electronic space, exchanging greetings and taking their leave in the casual, friendly manner of people visiting their local pub. The conversation on BlueSky ebbs and flows as people “go idle” to attend to work or other tasks, then return their attention to their computer screens and to more active participation in the ongoing electronic dialogue.

In this article, I present findings based on my research on BlueSky. I discuss BlueSky participants’ online performances of gendered and raced identities. Participants interpret their own and others’ identities within the context of expectations and assumptions derived from offline U.S. culture, as well as from their membership in various computer-related subcultures. Given the predominance of white

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men on BlueSky, such identity interpretations also rely on expectations concerning masculinity and whiteness. BlueSky identity performances provide information pertaining not just to online interaction but also to the social construction of gendered and raced identities more generally.

### DOING RESEARCH ON BLUESKY

BlueSky is a type of interactive, text-only, online forum known as a "mud." Mud originally stood for Multi-User Dungeon (based on the original multiperson networked dungeons-and-dragons type game called MUD). As in other online chat programs, people connect to mud programs through Internet accounts and communicate through typed text with other people currently connected to that mud. There are hundreds of muds available on the Internet and through private online services. Many muds serve as gaming spaces for adventure or "hack-and-slash" games. Muds also operate as locations for professional meetings, classes, and other pedagogical purposes and as social spaces. Although participants have programmed various toys and games for use within BlueSky, BlueSky functions primarily as a social meeting space.

I began my research on muds after about a year of online experience (which did not include experience on muds). BlueSky was one of many muds I visited during the first few weeks of my research. I eventually focused the research solely on BlueSky, although still spending some time each week on other muds. From the beginning of my participation on BlueSky, I informed other participants that I was conducting research and often solicited comments from them regarding my interpretations.

I refer to my online research methodology as participant-observation despite the fact that my participation consisted largely of reading and writing online text. In contrast to studies of e-mail lists or newsgroups, the forum I studied involved near-synchronous communication (meaning that messages passed back and forth more quickly and in a more conversational style than in e-mail or bulletin board systems). During my participation, I experienced the online conversations just as the participants did, going through a learning process and acclimation to the medium like any other "newbie." My own experiences during this learning process provided me with important information about the nature of online textual communication. Unlike researchers studying previously produced online text, I had a stake in ongoing conversations. Joining the group and engaging in the same activities as other participants also allowed me to ask questions on the spot and to gain a feel for the timing and rhythm of communications.

Like participant-observers and ethnographers of other types of groups, I gradually became a member of the social group, learning both technical aspects of online communication and social norms that enabled me to continue my participation. While I was not able to observe facial and bodily gestures (except during offline group meetings and interviews), I did learn the social contexts for the text produced

on BlueSky and also learned BlueSky participants' own methods for compensating for the lack of physical contact and "given-off" information.

I continued my participant-observation on BlueSky for more than two years, during which time I spent between 10 and 20 hours per week online. In addition to observing and participating in day-to-day conversations and interaction on BlueSky, I also conducted brief informal interviews with several participants online. Examples of online conversations in this article are taken from the thousands of pages of participation logs that I gathered while online through a feature of the program allowing me to record all text that appeared on my screen. Multiple conversations often occur simultaneously on the mud, making log segments long and confusing to read. I have therefore edited the log excerpts provided herein, removing portions of other conversations. However, I have left individual lines of text as originally expressed by participants. Each individual's contribution to a conversation begins with their online name. Since text from each participant only appears on other participants' screens when the participant finishes typing the line and hits the "enter" key, individual lines on muds tend to be short.

In addition to spending time with BlueSky people online, I've met them and other mudders offline for social activities and gatherings. I supplemented my participant-observation on BlueSky with many hours on several other social muds and by reading various online resources relating to muds, including Usenet newsgroup and e-mail list postings. In addition, I also conducted 30 in-depth face-to-face interviews with BlueSky participants in several U.S. cities. As is common in ethnographic studies, my interview questions arose out of my experiences online. The interviews allowed me to more directly compare my understanding of BlueSky with that of other participants, to ask more detailed questions than is easily possible on the mud, to address sensitive and serious topics (sometimes difficult to bring up in the often raucous atmosphere of BlueSky), to obtain further information about participants' offline lives and relationships, and to compare my impressions of their offline identity performances with their online presentations of self.

Many of the people who connect to BlueSky have been mudding for more than seven years and have formed relationships with each other that often extend offline. Most are sophisticated computer users, many of whom work with computers as programmers or system administrators. Almost all come from middle-class backgrounds, and the majority are white, young, male, and heterosexual. While more than 300 people occasionally connect to BlueSky, I determined 127 to be "regulars," based on level of participation and participants' own understanding of who constituted regulars of the social space. Approximately 27 percent of these regulars are female, and approximately 6 percent are Asian American. Most participants are in their mid- to late 20s. I am able to state these demographics with confidence owing to several factors, including my own offline meetings with participants, participants' frequent offline meetings with each other, participants' length of acquaintance, and BlueSky norms regarding self-disclosure and congruity between online and offline presentations of self.

BlueSky, like many online forums, was established during the Internet's earlier years, when online participants were even more likely to be white, male, middle-class, and either associated with a university or working in a technical field. BlueSky participants have also resisted the entrance of newcomers into their group, especially in recent years. Thus, the percentage of women on BlueSky is even lower, at 27 percent, than that on the Internet generally. Like the Internet, BlueSky also remains predominantly white and middle class but may have a higher percentage of Asian American participants.<sup>2</sup>

### STUDYING IDENTITY ONLINE

Text-based online communication, such as that which occurs on BlueSky, limits the communication of information about selves and identities to textual description only. Participants must learn to compensate for the lack of audio and visual cues and make choices about how to represent themselves. BlueSky participants use their years of experience with online communication and their familiarity with each other to compensate for the limitations of text-only communications. They have developed an elaborate subculture, using repeated patterns of speech and specialized features of the mud program to add the nuance and depth that such attributes as tone of voice and gesture provide in face-to-face communication. Now fully acclimated to the medium, they experience their online conversations as very similar to face-to-face interaction.

Researchers such as West and Fenstermaker (1995, 13) have emphasized the importance of understanding how "all social exchanges, regardless of the participants or the outcome, are simultaneously 'gendered,' 'raced,' and 'classed.'" (Such exchanges are also importantly characterized by other aspects of identity such as sexuality and age.) Despite frequent avowals to the contrary in various media, these aspects of identity characterize online social exchanges as well as face-to-face interaction. However, because taken-for-granted visual cues are unavailable in online text-based communication, people must make choices about what to reveal about themselves, how to describe themselves, and how to evaluate others' identity information and descriptions.

The limitations and special factors of online interaction can thus make participants more conscious of both their own identity performances and their evaluation of others' identity performances. Studying relations of dominance and difference online, where appearance cues are hidden, can yield further insights into the workings of the social processes by which identity understandings are created, maintained, and/or changed.

For instance, Omi and Winant (1994, 59) point out that "one of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race," and that based on our cultural knowledge of racial differences, we make assumptions based on those appearances that we notice and classify as relating to race. "We

expect differences in skin color, or other racially coded characteristics, to explain social differences" (Omi and Winant 1994, 60). One might expect, then, that in a social environment in which people encounter and interact with others without being able to see them, that online participants would not make gendered, raced, and classed assumptions about others whom they encounter. Certainly many online participants, in keeping with the predominance of the ideal of "color blindness" in our society, claim that this is the case.

Yet, gender and race are concepts "which signif[y] and symboliz[e] social conflicts and interests by *referring* to different types of human bodies" (Omi and Winant 1995, 55, emphasis added). The importance of such signification and symbolization continues in online interaction. The bodies of others may remain hidden and inaccessible, but this if anything gives references to such bodies even more social importance. As Omi and Winant explain, "Despite its uncertainties and contradictions, the concept of race continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world" (p. 55). This remains true about race, as well as about gender, class, sexuality, and age, especially when that uncertainty is compounded by the lack of physical presence in online encounters. Online participants assume that other participants do have bodies and that those bodies, if seen, would reveal important information. The assumed congruence between certain types of bodies and certain psychological, behavioral, and social characteristics results in the expectation by online participants that aspects of the hidden bodies—of, in effect, other participants' "true" identities—can be deduced (if imperfectly) from what is revealed online.

BlueSky participants told me that they hold in reserve their evaluations of people online until able to check these through an offline meeting. In cases where offline identities do not match online identities, they also attempt to explain having been fooled as to someone's true identity. Individual cases of mistaken identity require adjustment and explanation, demonstrating participants' expectations that essential, consistent identities are rooted in and connected to distinctly classifiable bodies. They expect that in most cases, the truth of these identities will come through in online communication, at least for those experienced in evaluating online identity performances.

## MASCULINITIES AND COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

Masculinity does not constitute a single uniform standard of behavior but rather comprises a range of gender identities clustered around expectations concerning masculinity that Connell (1995) has termed *hegemonic masculinity*. Connell (1995, 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." While few men actually embody the hegemonic mas-

culine ideal, they nevertheless benefit from the patriarchal dividend of dominance over women. However, they must also negotiate their own relationship to that ideal.

This negotiation, as well as the performance of specific masculinities, occurs through interaction with others. As Messerschmidt (1993, 31) points out, "Masculinity is never a static or a finished product. Rather, men construct masculinities in specific social situations." Segal (1990, 123) also describes masculinity as emerging through relations with others and as relational by definition:

As it is represented in our culture, "masculinity" is a quality of being which is always incomplete, and which is equally based on a social as on a psychic reality. It exists in the various forms of power men ideally possess: the power to assert control over women, over other men, over their own bodies, over machines and technology.

Perhaps the most salient of these forms of masculine power for the men on BlueSky is that over technology. Not all BlueSky participants work with computers, but even most of those who do not work in computer-related fields have done so in the past. In addition to their socializing on BlueSky, many participants employ computers for other leisure uses, including playing computer games on their home computers and participating in networked games available on the Internet.

As such, BlueSky participants enact a form of masculinity congruent with computer culture, itself a largely masculine domain (Spertus 1991; Turkle 1984, 1988; Ullman 1995). Wright (1996, 86) discusses the particular style of masculinity in both engineering and computer culture as "requiring aggressive displays of technical self-confidence and hands-on ability for success, defining professional competence in hegemonically masculine terms and devaluing the gender characteristics of women." Many conversations on BlueSky revolve around topics relating to computers, including information concerning new software, planned purchases, technical advice, and so on. In my interviews, many participants stressed the importance of the computer work-related information they obtained on BlueSky. During the day, people frequently log on with a particular question or problem from work that the others on BlueSky help them solve. Through these interactions, participants demonstrate technical knowledge and reinforce a group identity connected to computer technology. This also connects the group identity to masculinity since, as Cockburn (1985, 12) states, "Technology enters into our sexual identity: femininity is incompatible with technological competence; to feel technically competent is to feel manly."

### **"How Did I Get So Nerdy?"**

While their computer skills help BlueSky participants gain and maintain employment and their connections with computers have cultural cachet as well, U.S. culture regards computer expertise and those who hold it ambivalently. This ambivalence extends particularly to the perceived gender identity of people skilled in computer use. American ambivalence about computers centers on the figure of

the “nerd.” For instance, Turkle (1984, 197-98) discusses the self-perception of MIT students as nerds by virtue of their connection to technology; she argues that MIT computer science students are “the ostracized of the ostracized” and “archetypal nerds.” However, in her discussion of Turkle’s descriptions, Wajcman (1991, 144) points out that

an obsession with technology may well be an attempt by men who are social failures to compensate for their lack of power. On the other hand, mastery over this technology does bestow some power on these men; in relation to other men and women who lack this expertise, in terms of the material rewards this skill brings, and even in terms of their popular portrayal as “heroes” at the frontiers of technological progress.

The growing pervasiveness of computers in work and leisure activities has changed many people’s relationship to computers and thus has also changed some of the meaning of the term *nerd*. Its use as a pejorative term thus varies in meaning depending on the social context. As an in-group term, it can convey affection or acceptance. Even when used pejoratively to support structures of hegemonic masculinity, it can confer grudging respect for technical expertise.

Many BlueSky participants possess personal or social characteristics that fit the nerd stereotype. As represented in the Nerdity Test, available online, such characteristics include fascination with technology, interest in science fiction and related media such as comic books, and perceived or actual social ineptitude and sartorial disorganization.<sup>3</sup> BlueSky participants illustrate their recognition of the nerd as both a desirable and marginal masculine identity in their discussions about nerd identity, as exemplified by the following statements culled from several different conversations on BlueSky. (Each of the lines below is presented as it appeared on my screen. Note that all caps in online discourse generally connotes shouting.)

Ulysses looks in henri’s glasses and sees his reflection, and exclaims “Oh NO! I’m a NERD!”

Mender says “when you publish please feel free to refer to me as ‘nerdy but nice’”

Jet says, “HOW DID I GET SO NERDY”

Randy <-- fits one of the standard nerd slots

In the above quotes, BlueSky participants humorously identify themselves as nerds and connect with each other through play with that identity. But they also indicate their understanding that this disqualifies them from a more hegemonic masculine identity. Ulysses’s mock dismay at his nerdy looks and the “but” in Mender’s phrase “nerdy but nice” indicate their evaluations of the nerd identity as not completely desirable.

#### “Didja Spike ’Er?”: Heterosexual Masculinity Online

As Segal (1994, 268-69) points out, “‘Gender’ and ‘sexuality’ are at present conceptually interdependent” and “provide two of the most basic narratives through

which our identities are forged and developed." Understandings of one's own and others' gender identities include assumptions about sexuality. While not all BlueSky participants are heterosexual, heterosexuality is an important component of the particular style of masculinity enacted on BlueSky. However, in this forum in which relationships are based so heavily on "talk," talk about sex and about men and women not surprisingly becomes more important to acceptable masculine performance than avowed conformity to particular sexual desires, practices, or relationships.

For instance, two very active and well-respected BlueSky male regulars define themselves as bisexual. One of these has never had a sexual relationship with a man. The other had a relationship with another male mudder (who only rarely appears on BlueSky), which was known about and accepted by most other BlueSky participants. Both of these BlueSky regulars currently live with women in long-term relationships. Neither is viewed by other BlueSky men as having strayed very far from heterosexuality. However, it is also worth noting that they very actively participate in jokes and conversations depicting women as sexual objects as well as in other forms of BlueSky banter connected to the performance of masculinity.

In keeping with acceptable performance of hegemonic masculinity, both men and women on BlueSky distance themselves from femininity and, to some extent, from women in general. Conversations that refer to women outside the mud, particularly women in whom a male participant might have a romantic interest, bluntly depict such women as sexual objects. However, participants' allusions to sexual activity are so out of context to the circumstances described that these references incorporate a high degree of irony. Participants further enhance this irony through the use of formulaic joking patterns, as in the following variations on the question, "Didja spike her?" culled from three separate conversations.

Mender says "did I mention the secretary babe smiled at me today"

Roger Pollack WOO WOO

Jet says "cool Mender"

Jet says "did you spike 'er"

Mender says "No, sir, I did not spike 'er."

\* \* \*

McKenzie wonders if he should continue this e-mail correspondence or just wait till he can meet her tomorrow

McKenzie siigh

Locutus says "meet whom"

Locutus shouts into a microphone, "SPIKE HER"

\* \* \*

Locutus had a short conversation with a 50-55 year old wrinkly well dressed woman in the wine section of the grocery

Mender says "didja spike 'er, Locutus?"  
 Rimmer says "DIDJA SPIKE HER LOCUTUS"  
 Locutus says "hell no"

In each of these conversations, mere mention of a woman provokes the formulaic question, "Didja spike her?" Such joking formulas constitute techniques of group identity construction. Through jokes regarding women's status as sexual objects, the men on BlueSky demonstrate support for hegemonic masculinity. As Lyman (1998, 173) explains, "The emotional structure of the male bond is built upon a joking relationship that 'negotiates' the tension men feel about their relationships with each other, and with women." The ironic sexism of much BlueSky discourse maintains "the order of gender domination" (p. 172), almost irrespective of other aspects of BlueSky men's activities and behaviors with and toward the women in their lives.

However, the joking quality of the "didja spike her?" conversations also suggests an uneasiness with hegemonic masculinity. During a period when several participants had read a piece I had written analyzing references to gender on BlueSky (which did not include a discussion of the term *spike*), Rimmer asked me about "spike her" references. (My online name is Copperhead in the following example.)

Rimmer says "So if I now said to Locutus 'So did you SPIKE her?' would that be offensive?"  
 Copperhead does find the "did you SPIKE her" stuff a bit offensive, actually  
 Rimmer says "Wow; the SPIKE stuff wouldn't be funny if there was any chance in hell that anyone ever would"  
 henri nods at rimmer  
 Locutus says "the 'didja spike her' joke brings up the whole 'women as conquest' idea"  
 Rimmer says "Boy I don't think it's a woman as conquest thing at all"  
 henri says "what you find offensive (and I agree) is people thinking any time a guy interacts with a woman they should ask if their pants fell off and they locked hips"  
 Rimmer says "I think it's more of a 'Mudders never have sex' thing"  
 McKenzie agrees with Rimmer, "asking 'didja SPIKE her' is more parody than anything else"  
 Rimmer doesn't think he's ever asked "DIDJA SPIKE HER" and expected someone to actually say YES  
 Rimmer says "It would be tacky as all hell in that case"  
 McKenzie says "actually everyone would say 'I HATE you'"

Rimmer points out the joking nature of the question, "Didja spike her?" His assertion that "the SPIKE stuff wouldn't be funny if there was any chance in hell that anyone ever would" specifically highlights the mildly mocking intent of the joke. Yet, as Locutus and henri recognize, "spike" references rely on the continuing portrayal of women as sexual objects. Women's unattainability as sexual objects to some men provides the sting in the self-deprecatory joke, leaving in place a normative expectation that masculinity involves the sexual possession of women and that this is a desirable norm to attain. Rimmer and McKenzie indicate this in their

identification of "didja spike her" as a rhetorical question. Rimmer states that "mudders never have sex" and suggests that they would not talk about it if they did since the other "less fortunate" participants would, as McKenzie indicates, say, "I HATE you." The joke is intended to be on the participants themselves, regarding their nonhegemonic masculinity, but women are the true butts of the joke.

BlueSky participants' sexual practices also may diverge from the aggressive hegemonic model implied by "spike." The potential discrepancy between sexual practice and group identity practice demonstrates some of the dilemmas involved in negotiating masculinities. Like adolescent boys who feel compelled to invent sexual exploits about which they can brag, men in groups create sexual and gender narratives that may bear little resemblance to other aspects of their lived experience but that nevertheless comprise important elements of their masculine identities and their connections with other men.

#### **"Blubbery Pale Nerdettes": Nerds, Gender, and Sexuality**

BlueSky discussions also demonstrate the dilemma that nerd identity introduces into the connection between gender identity and sexuality. Nerdism in both men and women is held to decrease sexual attractiveness, but in men this is compensated by the relatively masculine values attached to intelligence and computer skills. In women, lack of sexual attractiveness is a far greater sin. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt of a conversation about attendance at science fiction fan conventions among several male BlueSky participants.

Mike Adams says "that's half the reason I go to cons. Sit and have these discussions with people"  
 Bob . o O ( No it isn't )  
 Mike Adams says "well, okay it's to ogle babes in barbarian outfits"  
 Drog says "\*\*BABES\*?"  
 Drog says "you need new glasses"  
 Drog says "pasty skinned blubbery pale nerdettes"  
 Locutus laaaaaaugh  
 Locutus says "ARRRRR 'tis the WHITE WHAAALE"  
 Drog wouldn't pork any women he's ever seen at gaming/other cons, not even with Bob's cock.  
 Perry says "that's because pork is not kosher, drog"  
 Locutus says "women-met-at-cons: the Other White Meat"  
 Perry LAUGHS  
 Drog HOWLS at locutus

While apparently quite misogynistic, the impetus for this conversation relates at least as much to the BlueSky love of wordplay (another nerdy pastime) as to negative attitudes toward women. The word choices and the source of the humor in the above banter also reveal some key assumptions about and perceptions of nerd identity. Besides the implication in Drog's description that female nerds, like their male

counterparts, do not spend much time outdoors or engage in exercise, his and Locutus's statements also represent nerds as white. While the term *nerd* may be applied to nonwhite males who meet other nerd identity criteria (see, e.g., Cheng 1996), the ideal-typical nerd is white. Similarly, nerds are presumed male, as evidenced by the term *nerdette*. This term, like use of the phrase "lady doctor," defines the normative case of nerd as not female.

This connection between nerdism and masculinity may be what makes a nerd identity so damaging to women's potential and perceived sexual desirability. The participants express the assumption that nerdettes who would attend science fiction conventions by definition lack sexual desirability and quickly join in the joke set by Drog's critique of Mike Adams's potentially transgressive desire. Mike Adams, on the other hand, ceased further participation in the conversation until the topic of cons had passed.

### Heterosexual "Dropouts"

Some of the ways in which BlueSky participants enact and express heterosexual identities suggest that in examining connections between sexualities and masculinities, we need to problematize notions of heterosexuality as a single, uniform sexual identity. A standard Kinsey-style spectrum of straight to gay identities based on sexual behaviors or feelings does not adequately describe sexual identity on BlueSky, as it leaves out important information concerning affectional connections and orientation toward sexuality in general. As Segal (1994, 257) states, "It is men's fear of, or distaste for, sex with women, as well known as it is well concealed, that the heterosexual imperative works so hard to hide." Discussions of sexuality on BlueSky sometimes reveal this distaste, as well as the unorthodox solutions some men find for the dilemma imposed on them by the tension between distaste and hegemonic masculine identity, including its heterosexual component.

For instance, several of the straight men on BlueSky report that they have "given up" on women and/or on romantic relationships and have been celibate more or less by choice for several years. In discussions on BlueSky such as the one below, these men complain of rejection based on their nonhegemonic status.

Stomp has problems with dating and women and stuff, but also has serious reservations about the accepted male-female dynamic in the USA, to the point where he's never felt much point in getting over the first set of problems.

Drog says "Sides, women LIKE scumbags; it's been proven"

Ulysses nods at Drog

Drog should have been gay, he can relate to other guys

Stomp says "as far as I've been able to observe, abusing women (subtly) is one of the fastest and most efficient ways of getting laid."

Drog will agree with that

Stomp says "Once I realized this, I just sort of went: Well, forget it, then."

- Drog says "guys get to be assholeish and abusive cause that kinda attitude is richly rewarded"
- Ulysses says "Nice guys end up being the friends to whom those women say, 'You're such a good listener, let me tell you about the latest horrible thing my inconsiderate sweetie did to me'"
- Stomp says "Expressing interest in a way that isn't assholeish invites getting cut down brutally."
- Ulysses says "We tried opening our mouths a few times, and got laughed at"
- Ulysses says "End of experiment"
- Stomp says "You get seen as weak."
- Ulysses says "self-assurance and confidence are not options for me. I'd have to go back to infancy and start over"
- Drog says "this mud is full of 'nice guys.' it's also full of guys who haven't been laid in epochs if ever"

The male participants in the above conversation express considerable ambivalence toward predominant standards of masculinity, portraying themselves as "nice guys" left out of the standard (in their understanding) heterosexual dynamic of violent conquest. Yet, although they designate more sexually successful men as (by definition) "jerks," their discussion implies that the real problem is not with "assholeish" men but rather with the women who like the abuse they get from such men. Rather than merely rejecting a heterosexuality they view as abusive, they represent themselves as reacting to having been "cut down brutally," "laughed at," and "seen as weak," as well as used as a sympathetic ear without regard for their own potential desires. Drog, Stomp, and Ulysses still represent themselves as heterosexual, despite their avowed lack of heterosexual activity. Heterosexuality remains an important component of their identities, interconnected as it is with hegemonic masculinity. In their retreat from heterosexual activity, Drog, Stomp, and Ulysses do not opt to ally themselves in friendship or identification with women. Instead, as Drog says, they "relate to other guys." BlueSky provides them with a sympathetic forum in which most other participants are men and the few women are less obviously women both because they cannot be seen and because they conform to BlueSky standards and expectations of behavior set by the men in the group.

The rather stereotypical depiction of women, as not only tolerating but also desiring abuse, points to some potential interpretations of the male angst expressed. Hegemonic masculinity's requirement of heterosexuality contains an inherent contradiction. As Lyman (1998, 178) points out,

The separation of intimacy from sexuality transforms women into "sexual objects," which both justifies aggression at women by suspending their relationships to the men and devalues sexuality itself, creating a disgust of women as the sexual "object" unworthy of intimate attention.

While the hegemonic gender order thus depicts women as inferior and not acceptable identity models, it nevertheless requires that men desire these inferior (even

disgusting) creatures. The men in the conversation above represent casualties of this contradiction. Their discomfort blends a rejection of perceived expectations regarding hegemonic masculinity—especially those involving violence toward women—with a more hegemonically congruent discomfort with women themselves.

### “Mov[ing] Well in Caucasian Spaces”

Given online demographics, participants tend to assume that others they encounter online are white. As RaveMage, a Filipino American participant, stated, “All the males [on BlueSky] are caucasian or move well in caucasian spaces,” implicitly recognizing BlueSky itself as a “caucasian space.” Whiteness thus becomes the “default” identity. In addition, as revealed in the discussion of nerdttes above, whiteness is connected to the particular subcultural nerd identity. Aspects of nerdiness come to signify whiteness as well.

For instance, Jet, a very active regular on BlueSky for several years, complicates his Chinese American identity by often referring to himself online as white. Other BlueSky participants know that his parents emigrated from China, and discussions of his Chinese heritage also occur. When I asked Jet about his self-defining as white, he talked about how whiteness marks a cultural identity as well as a racial distinction. (Our conversation occurred through “whispers,” meaning that the online text was viewed only by Jet and I and not by other participants on the mud.)

Copperhead whispers “several times when questions of ethnicity or race have come up you’ve made the statement that you’re white; I’m wondering what you mean by that.”

Jet whispers “I mean that I am essentially an american clothed in a chinese body. I hardly know how to speak chinese, I hardly know anything about the culture, and I don’t associate with orientals a lot by choice, unlike many immigrant children. So I feel ‘white,’ i.e. american”

Copperhead whispers “so if ‘american’ = ‘white’ is BlueSky a white space? And what does that mean for people who aren’t white here?”

Jet whispers “no no, american != white.<sup>4</sup> i use ‘white’ in the sense of the martin mull stereotype; very bland, whitebread; obviously i’m not. it’s a sort of irony.”

Jet whispers “mudding transcends ethnicity. i don’t consider blue sky ‘white’ or ‘american’ or any ethnicity, i just consider it a place to hang out. if you were all asian and had the same personalities, so be it”

While Jet refers to his own “cultural whiteness,” he denies cultural effects of race or ethnicity through his suggestion that it would be possible for BlueSky participants to be “all asian” and yet have “the same personalities.” This elision of the cultural aspects of race, which his ironic labeling of himself as white both contradicts and highlights, enables him to claim that “mudding transcends ethnicity.” On one hand, Jet suggests that the physical characteristics associated with race do not determine identity. Although acknowledging his ethnic heritage in some ways (at one point during this conversation, he stated, for instance, that he would prefer to marry

another Asian American) and labeling his body Chinese, Jet labels himself white based on the cultural affinities that he finds more salient. However, in calling himself white, he still gives his (cultural) identity a racial label. Although he denies that American equals white, he nevertheless labels his American-ness "white." Jet's representation of himself as white serves as a "racial project," which, in Omi and Winant's (1994, 56) words, forms both "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines." In Jet's case, his representation of himself as white reinforces the dominant order in which benefits accrue to those who are white. But he also attempts to reposition himself as entitled to those benefits because beneath the "clothing" of his Chinese body, he is "really" white.

In recognition of the ironic contradictions involved in his self-identity, Jet associates true whiteness with "bland, whitebread." White participants on BlueSky also make this association. For instance, Peg, a white female regular, classified herself as "pretty white, but not wonder-bread, [my] father's family are eastern europeans." By referring to "real" whiteness as "wonder-bread" (bland, nonnutritious, over-processed), Peg distances herself from hegemonic white identity. This sets up a hierarchy of whiteness in which only full-blooded WASPs qualify as "really" white. Those who, like her, have other European ancestry are only "pretty" white. Jet's similar reference to "bland whitebread" allows him to be white too, even though he is not "really" white.

Both participants mark themselves with an ironically detached white-but-not-white identity. However, they arrive at this identity formulation from very different offline physical realities. Peg is short and petite, with very pale skin and light reddish-brown hair. Jet is more than six feet tall and thin with light brown skin and almost black hair. That I can so describe them, and experience their similar self-identification as ironic, points to assumptions concerning the physical nature of racial identity that I, like the other BlueSky participants, have internalized from the surrounding culture.

In the following conversation, several participants, drawing on this physical understanding of race, contest Jet's self-definition as white.

Jet rather enjoyed the LA riots in a sick way  
 Jet went to Canter's 3 days afterwards, and there was us, 4 white guys, and 12 cops  
 Jet says "That's it."  
 Jet says "(we were the 4 white guys)"  
 Mender . o O ( Jet's a white guy! )  
 Ichi giggles at Jet  
 Jet . o O ( oh i am )  
 Jet says "You've met me, you know I'm white"  
 Mender says "not as white as I am, bucko"  
 Pyramid says "HOW WHITE ARE YOU?"  
 McKenzie says "Mender gets waspy"  
 Jet says "I'm pretty white"  
 Jet says "no joke"

Mender's claim to be whiter than Jet provokes an accusation of "waspiness" from McKenzie. As with Peg's definition of herself as only "pretty white," this stance labels the aggressive assertion of white identity as waspiness, again relying on an understanding that white Anglo-Saxon protestants represent hegemonic whiteness. Just as male participants on BlueSky distance themselves in some ways from hegemonic masculinity, white participants distance themselves from hegemonic white identity. Like the ironic references to hegemonic masculinity contained in the "didja spike 'er" jokes, BlueSky discussions of whiteness disavow identification with the very top of the dominance chain, yet ultimately leave intact the taken-for-granted workings of racial dominance found in American society.

These discussions about racial identity online emphasize both the absence and the presence of race online. Gilroy (1987, 24) argues that race and racism are processes and that the meanings of race "are unfixed and subject to the outcomes of struggle." We learn to classify people by skin color and other physical identifiers and learn to associate these identifiers with race. Hence, I can easily point to Peg and label her white and to Jet and label him Asian. But the meanings of these designations vary and are sites of struggle, as both Jet and Peg indicate in their self-identifications. When these struggles are brought online, some of their parameters change.

Jet's self-identification of white is challenged by other BlueSky participants. Having met him, they rely on their understanding of the physical nature of race to classify him based on bodily characteristics. Thus, participants bring their assumptions about race with them to online interactions. However, online participants perform racial identities under slightly different rules. For instance, nonwhite participants can benefit from the predominant presumption of whiteness online. Spontaneity, a Chinese American, indicates that online interactions free him from fears of harassment.

Spontaneity whispers "I've noticed a lack of harassment on line in general."

Copperhead whispers "that's interesting; less harassment online than off?"

Spontaneity whispers "Yah. Now, it may just be that people are able to be more subtle online, but I don't think so. For example, it's fairly common for me to get shouted at on the streets."

The high percentage of whites online combines with a U.S. discourse of "color blindness," making direct references to race taboo (Frankenberg 1993, 14). This enables whites to assume that other online participants are also white. Since the space this potentially opens up for harassment-free speech from nonwhites remains defined as white, the advantage to nonwhites constitutes a form of "passing" for white rather than a true dissolution of racial difference and hierarchy. However, the lack of visual cues in text-based online spaces makes passing more feasible online than off. This does constitute some degree of "leveling the playing field" (although the type of game and its rules remain unquestioned).

## CONCLUSION

The masculinities performed on BlueSky demonstrate the convergence and interaction of several important facets of identity, including class, gender, sexuality, race, age, and relationships to technology. U.S. cultural expectations regarding technology usage converge with stereotypes concerning race and gender, resulting in a white nerd masculine identity congruent with related forms of masculinity found in computing and engineering fields. In enacting this form of masculinity, BlueSky participants demonstrate both its divergence from and convergence with hegemonic masculinity. Participants recognize their lack of hegemonic status and poke fun at some aspects of hegemonic masculinity. However, they also distance themselves from women and from femininity and engage in a style of interaction congruent with hegemonic masculinity. The coupling of expectations of technological competence with this predominant interactional mode of obnoxious bantering strengthens connections between computer technological competence and masculinities.

BlueSky participants diverge somewhat from hegemonic masculinity in their discussions of various aspects of sexuality. Several participants find their homosexual or bisexual orientation accepted within the group. However, both heterosexual and nonheterosexual men (and women) participate in conversations that depict women as sexual objects. This may indicate that at least for some men, distance from women comprises a more important component of masculine identity than sexual distance from men. Inclusion of homosexual and bisexual men who perform aspects of heterosexual masculinity (in that they also sexually objectify women) creates a social environment in which homosociality takes precedence over attitudes toward homosexuality.

This more inclusive stance may be particularly possible for men online. In text-based online communication, the lack of physical presence and awareness of each other's male bodies decreases the likelihood that gestures or utterances will be misconstrued as sexual advances or interest. Under such circumstances, heterosexual men may be able to more safely "pal around" with nonheterosexual men, at least as long as those men continue to perform a masculine identity congruent in the main with that of the heterosexual men.

Conversations on BlueSky concerning men, women, relationships, and sexuality also demonstrate some of the variation within heterosexual male identities. Heterosexual men may like or dislike the women they theoretically desire. They may spend time socially with women or mostly with other men. As in the examples of several of the BlueSky men, some heterosexual men also maintain a heterosexual identity without engaging in heterosexual relationships. For men such as Ulysses and Stomp, changing norms of masculinity have failed to resolve the contradiction inherent in hegemonic masculinity's relationship to women as both desired and disgusting objects. Such men view hegemonically masculine males as jerks, thereby distancing themselves from that ideal. However, they also view women as people

who like those jerks. In this way, they distance themselves from women, representing them as foreign beings who unfathomably like abuse. This leaves these heterosexual dropouts with no company but their own and that of other, similarly not-quite-hegemonic men (and a few women who perform congruent identities). Through wryly ironic jokes about men, women, and sexuality, BlueSky participants create and enact a culture that continually reiterates this pattern of distancing from both other men and most women.

BlueSky's culture, formed by a predominantly white group, also draws from and reenacts white cultural norms of masculine behaviors. Here again, BlueSky participants distance themselves from the hegemonic ideal ("waspy" or "true" whiteness) but also continue to distance themselves from oppressed groups. The whiteness of BlueSky is reinforced by the larger cultural contexts in which it is embedded, including U.S. and Internet cultures. The predominance of whites online, combined with U.S. norms of color blindness, leads to assumptions that online participants are white unless stated otherwise. Thus, Asian Americans on BlueSky must either take a distinctly oppositional stance to the predominant norm of whiteness or themselves perform versions of white masculinity to fit in with the group. For some, such as Spontaneity, presumptions of whiteness, combined with the unavailability in interaction of the physical markers of race, provide greater freedom from harassment. However, given BlueSky participants' knowledge of both online and offline identity information, Asian American men's status as "one of the white boys" can be challenged, as Jet found.

The relative inclusiveness of BlueSky is predicated on the continuation of a social structure in which white middle-class men continue to have the power to include or not to include people whose gender, sexuality, or race marks them as other. BlueSky's regulars include a few women, nonheterosexuals, and Asian Americans who fit themselves into BlueSky's cultural context through their performances of white masculinities. The text-only nature of much online communication can facilitate greater inclusiveness. However, as on BlueSky, many online groups also make offline connections with each other and bring knowledge from those meetings to their online interactions. The predominance of white men online can also limit that inclusiveness to "others" who can fit themselves into a culture formed by and for those white men.

## NOTES

1. I have changed all names in this article, including the name of the mud and character names. I have replaced character names with names drawn from similar sources and references to retain some of the flavor of the originals. I refer throughout to BlueSky participants by these character names because, for the most part, they also refer to each other using character names rather than real-life names.

2. I conducted two online searches for information regarding Internet demographics. In 1995, two sites provided information about race, listing white participants at 83 percent and 87 percent, respectively; both showed Black participation at 5 percent and Asian at 3 percent. Neither of those sites still exists, and none of the sites I reviewed during my later search (28 November 1997) provided information

regarding race. That 1997 search indicates that approximately half of Internet users are age 35 or younger, and most have at least some college experience. More than 60 percent hold some form of professional, technical, managerial, or other white-collar job, with incomes clustering in the \$30,000 to \$90,000 range. Estimates of the percentage of women online vary from 31 percent to 45 percent. The following is a partial list of sites I reviewed for my November 1997 search: <http://www2.chaicenter.org/otn/aboutinternet/Demographics-Nielsen.html>; <http://www3.mids.org/ids/index.html>; <http://thehost.com/demo.htm>; <http://www.scruznet.com/%7Eplugin01/Demo.html>; <http://www.cyberatlas.com/demographics.html>; [http://www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/user\\_surveys/survey-1997-04](http://www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/user_surveys/survey-1997-04); and <http://www.ora.com/research/users/results.html>. Most of the surveys reported at these sites are done by commercial organizations that do not always reveal their methodology. They also often reserve details and/or the most recent information for paying customers. Therefore, I cannot vouch for the reliability of these statistics.

3. The Nerdity Test is available on the World Wide Web at, among other places, <http://165.91.72.200/nerd-backwards.html>.

4. The exclamation point and equals sign in this phrase come from programming languages in which != means "not equal to."

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