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# Nerds, Geeks, and the Hip/Square Dialectic in Contemporary Television

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## Abstract

Despite the easily identifiable concept of a “nerd,” only a few significant articles on nerds and popular culture, and specifically television, exist. This article contributes to television studies by addressing this overlooked, yet popularly significant, representation and lived reality in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. The article introduces the hip/square dialectic and explores the sociocultural construction of nerds vis-à-vis the hip/square dialectic as commodity. The article historicizes the hip/square construct of the nerd or geek on television, assesses claims about the emergence of geek chic, and introduces three reality television case studies: Tranji and reality TV nerd dancing; William Hung, *American Idol* loser; and the *Beauty and the Geek* program. At issue is the political-economic factors in the production and circulation of the nerd commodity and the racial and gendered or sexualized politics of the televisual nerd discourses and performances.

## Keywords

nerd, geek, reality television, hip, square, gender, masculinity, sexuality, race, chic

From *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Napoleon Dynamite* to Doogie Howser and Steve Urkel, the “nerd” or “geek” in American film and television has been a popular mainstay. Historically, the nerd has been constructed as an awkward, math-savvy social and sexual failure. In most instances, nerds are assumed and shown to be white and male, with several exceptions, such as Steve Urkel (played by Jaleel White) in *Family Matters*, and firmly heterosexual (also with minor exception), though his shortcomings are

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often ridiculed as a sign of sexual weakness and homosexuality. The nerd is culturally placed in contrast with a more athletic, socially skilled, sexually aware individual—the cool kid or jock, who demonstrates a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Such a dichotomy can be called the hip/square dialectic. This dialectic serves to construct both halves—the hipster and the square or nerd; without its counterpart, each loses its meaning. Thomas Frank (1997) cites the Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro" as defining how this dialectic functioned culturally in the postwar era: "one is Hip or one is square, . . . one is a rebel or one conforms," signaling the birth of cool as a rebel, nonconformist, nonconsumerist identity and politics (Frank 1997, 12). However, Frank argues that the 1960s culture war's hip/square relationship resulted in the co-opting of hip or cool to diffuse its potential transgressive political power and transform hip into a consumer commodity. This consumer commodity, as it is (re)produced in film, television, and other popular culture texts, has proven to hold significant cultural weight and economic benefit for media industries, at the expense of fully understanding the lived reality of those who would be "jocks" or "nerds." A product of postwar modernism, the nerd moniker has historically been used as a way of distinguishing, and discrediting, a particular expression of nonhegemonic masculinity and favoring the more hegemonic, consumer-viable contrast. In so doing, particular expressions of masculinity are reinscribed and the variety of available cultural discourses curtailed.

Television is often cited as one of the central places where ideologies of gendered and racialized identity are created and circulated (e.g., Newcomb 2007; Allen and Hill 2004). In his work on television, John Hartley (2008, 3) reminds us that "it is important to seek to understand, within the flux of symbols, meanings, statements, and stories circulating on TV, how TV truths are communicated, and how television achieves its much-vaunted power to command." Thus, this article explores the sociocultural construction of nerds vis-à-vis the hip/square dialectic as commodity, with emphasis on its televisual expression. The article historicizes the hip/square construct of the nerd on television, assesses recent claims about the emergence of geek chic, and introduces three reality TV case studies: Tranji and nerd dancing; William Hung, *American Idol* loser; and the *Beauty and the Geek* program. At issue are the political-economic factors in the production and circulation of the nerd commodity and the racial and gendered or sexualized politics of the televisual nerd discourses. Despite the easily identifiable concept and image of a "nerd," only a few significant articles on nerds and popular culture, and specifically television, exist (e.g., Kendall 1999a, 1999b; Eglash 2002). This article should contribute to the field of television studies by addressing this overlooked, yet popularly significant, representation and lived reality.

## Nerd Etymology

Nerds in popular culture and media have been articulated through a converging set of historical discourses and lived realities. While today the term *nerd* might readily conjure up an overused image of a pasty white guy wearing thick glasses, frowns, and a plastic pocket protector while espousing mathematical and scientific minutiae, the

actual term *nerd* has a more obscure etymology. By some accounts, the first use of the word appeared in Dr. Seuss's 1950 book *If I Ran the Zoo*, where it is used in a seemingly nonsensical way (Kendall 1999a; Brooks 2008). From here, the next instances in print connected the term to *drip* or *square* in a 1951 *Newsweek* article, which discusses the use of the new slang word in Detroit (Brooks 2008). During the next several decades, the nerd concept also took on an intellectual, studious connotation that it still has today.

## The History of the Hip/Square Dialectic on Television

The nerd construct, and companions hipness and squareness, were mobilized and popularized quickly. Of course, media's role in the (re)production of cultural discourses (Hall 1977), and in this case the discourse of nerds and nerdiness, is integral. When looking historically at television texts, we can witness the "hip/square" dialectic and its political project play out in two major ways: (1) the odd-couple narrative of the square and his or her friendship with a hipster and (2) the antagonistic narrative of a square and his or her hip/cool competitor: the jock or popular kid.

The odd-couple hip/square dialectic is apparent in early American TV shows such as *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (CBS, 1959–63), where Dobie, the central character, plays the square to friend Maynard G. Krebs's hipster, who is actually the first Beatnik in a television sitcom. A similar friendship exists between *Star Trek's* (original series; NBC, 1966–69) Spock's intellectual square and Kirk, the hip, cool captain; or in *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–84), where we see the relationship between square, good-boy Richie and the Fonz, his black-leather-jacket-wearing, smooth-talking, girl-attracting buddy. The dialectic friendship has been represented as a group relationship in the 1974–79 hit *Welcome Back, Kotter* (ABC) with Arnold Horshack's square to the majority of the Sweathogs' hip: Vinnie Barbarino, Freddy Washington, and Juan Epstein.<sup>1</sup> In each of these shows, the relationship between the squares and hipsters is one of friendship, where the square is not ridiculed or outcast because of his square nerd masculinity. Rather, the hip/square relationship is used to bolster cool masculinity but not to demonize the square. The two work together, almost to confirm that a variety of masculinities are possible.

Not all nerds are televisually represented as the equal friend of a cool kid. Rather, the more popular imagining of the hip/square dialectic is in the unfriendly, competitive antagonism between the nerd and the jock or cool kid. Either the two characters or groups are enemies, with the nerd the butt of jokes and psychological violence, yet typically maintaining the moral high ground often ascribed to cultural outcasts, or the nerd group is segregated from the cool kids. This antagonism can be seen in such television shows as *Head of the Class* (1986–91), where the entire class of bright kids is separated from the mainstream athletic or cool culture of the school, as they emphasize science and music. Later inscriptions can be seen on *Freaks and Geeks* (NBC, 1999–2000) and *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–; in its third season as of this writing), both of which highlight nerds in cultural exile. Ironically, despite the critical acclaim and fan support for *Freaks and Geeks's* nuanced representation of youth

culture and cliques, the show was canceled after only twelve of the season's eighteen episodes had aired. The show ranks on *Time's* 100 Best TV Shows of All Times (*Time* 2007) and is one of *Entertainment Weekly's* best shows from 1983 to 2008 (*Entertainment Weekly* 2008).

The antagonistic hip/square expression is most classically seen in the infamous 1980s movie franchise *Revenge of the Nerds*, which solidified the prototypical nerd image in contemporary popular culture. In this film, the nerds try to gain social power, or become "cool," by starting a fraternity; their nemeses are the popular jocks, who humiliate and hurt the nerds, with the nerds seeking revenge. One of the central ways that "cool" is inscribed in this film is through a performance of masculinity. Kendall (1999a, 264) describes nerd masculinity as a combination of hypermasculinity and feminization, in essence a subordinated masculinity. The *Revenge of the Nerds* nerd construct also fits Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally's (1999) concept of "violent masculinity," as the filmic nerds use sexual violence against women as well as physical violence against the jocks, their rivals. As such, this is not simply a subordinated masculinity but one that is violently erupting in an attempt to become dominant, creating a tentative and shifting relationship between dominant and subordinate constructs. A final feature of this film is, as Kendall (1999a) argues, that it often mobilizes black civil rights, gay rights, and labor movement language to identify nerds as oppressed, yet at the same time the nerds exclude women, who are sometimes the objects of their violent actions. For instance, one nerd wears a mask to trick a sorority girl into thinking he is her boyfriend to have sex with her. When she later discovers the truth, instead of having him arrested for assault, she is happy to have discovered that nerds can be good lovers. Kendall (1999a, 279) concludes that "nerd imagery can thus either challenge or reinforce hegemonic masculinity. . . . It sometimes does both at the same time." Such a contradiction is an important feature of the dialectic and the antagonistic nerd construct, one that will return in the upcoming reality TV analysis.

## Race and the Gendered Nerd

One of the most significant American TV nerds of the late 1980s and into the 1990s is Steve Urkel from the sitcom *Family Matters* (ABC, 1989–97; CBS, 1997–98), a show about a black working-class family with a nerdy next-door neighbor, Steve Urkel (played by Jaleel White). Urkel is the spitting image of nerddom: thick glasses, high-pitched voice, suspenders, and floods—yet he is black, which made this show and this character seem novel. However, rather than celebrating the show for representing black nerds, one must acknowledge that a gay or black or female nerd needs to have such modifiers, which is emblematic of the racial and sexual assumptions of nerd identity, both in television and in social life. Ron Eglash (2002) addresses these issues in his work, in which he argues that racial implications are found in technological definitions of hegemonic and non- or counterhegemonic masculinity. He writes that oftentimes "masculine" technologies, such as barbeques and lawnmowers, which require physical activity, are socially contrasted with "nerd" technologies such as ham radio, calculators, and eventually the personal computer. This aligns the hip/

square dialectic of masculinity along technological divisions. Rather than end the argument here, Eglash outlines how the gendered technological nerd construct is assumed to be white, thus constructing racialized nerd discourses, though largely unacknowledged in sociocultural discourses. He contends that it is this “racialized intersection of technology and personal identity that functions as a selective gateway to technosocial power” (Eglash 2002, 57). Even though a black nerd may exist, the connection this figure has in white nerd circles is an unprivileged one given the state of racial politics in America. This same figure is excluded from the black community based on the stereotype of “African American cool.” Eglash (2002, 58) writes, “This compulsory cool of black culture is mirrored with compulsory nerdiness for oriental-ized others, such as Middle Eastern groups, groups from India, and Asian Americans.” As such, the black nerd assumes a liminal space, between black and white or Asian, between nerd and cool, and is excluded from most of those spaces, while the Asian nerd assumes a calcified state of oppression or privilege as an assumed nerd. In her work with youth at a racially diverse high school, Mary Bucholtz (2001) finds that these spaces align those outcast minority persons with “hyperwhiteness.” She contends that “the production of nerdiness via the rejection of coolness and the overt display of intelligence was often simultaneously (though not necessarily intentionally) the production of an extreme version of whiteness” (Bucholtz 2001, 86). This is partly achieved through the adoption of “superstandard English”—the rejection of slang and mainstream popular cultural references, in favor of a formal “reading style” of language, even in conversation—symbolizing “advanced literacy, extensive education, and high intelligence” (Bucholtz 2001, 92). Bucholtz notes how such a display takes whiteness to its logical ending, yet also tacitly demonstrates the centrality of black culture and language in youth culture writ large and, as Eglash (2002) notes, signaling black compulsory coolness.

Vershawn Ashanti Young (2007, 60) discusses how such a conundrum is noted by rapper Ice Cube, who quips, “real niggas ain’t faggots.” Young goes on to interrogate this problem in black masculinity, with the concepts he calls nigga-gender and faggot-gender: nigga-gender is constructed as a dominant physical masculinity and faggot-gender its intellectual, quieter, nonhegemonic masculinity. Both sides of the dialectic work through each other and use the opposite to define the self: “Each time he chooses nigga-gender, he must recommit to proving he’s not a faggot. He must recycle the language and behavior that reconstitute his gender. Those who embrace or who are ascribed faggot-gender are subject to the same pressure. We must ceaselessly prove that we’re not niggas. In both cases our efforts intensify the burden that we wish to alleviate, but they also produce an ironic and overwhelming desire for the other” (Young 2007, 60). The black nerd takes elements of this conundrum and the compulsory cool—compulsory nerdy divisions to their logical ending. Both pairings construct variations of black masculinity along homophobic and racist lines that work to constantly reconfirm the problematic binary.

Such racialized nerd dynamics are explored by Kendall’s (1999b, 2000) studies of online talk among self-identified nerds. In chats among BlueSky users, mostly white, male, middle-class, young, and heterosexual, the online participants engage in what

Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) call “liberal racism”—wherein participants erase race as an important category and, as Kendall (1999b) discovers, use whiteness as an assumed norm in an act of “colorblindness.” Kendall finds that people of color are accepted in white nerd culture by “passing” as white online, by eliding race altogether. Kendall further learns that these online nerds understand their sexuality as a nonhegemonic masculinity, yet hold problematic understandings of girl nerds (nerdettes, by some users accounts), wherein their misogynistic attitudes find “nerdettes” unattractive (i.e., “pasty whales”; Kendall 1999b). The article concludes that the online nerd identity is contradictory and raises questions about political backlashes against civil rights movements.

### **Geek Chic, Technosexuals, and Other Transpositions?**

It is important, here, to build on Eglash’s (2002) discussion of gendered technology, by examining the explosion of consumer computing technology in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, alongside newer media representations and sociocultural discourses of nerds. “Geek chic” and “technosexual” are concepts used to celebrate nerd identity and cast it in a slightly different light. As filmic and televisual texts are increasingly circumscribed by the neoliberal media landscape, they are increasingly following the logic of capital in functioning as part of a diverse media conglomerate, needing to recycle culture, and creating commercial intertexts (Meehan 1991) that accompany the original program. *Napoleon Dynamite* is a 2004 movie that pushed nerd identity into the realm of mass merchandising and the nerd identity into cult status. Its appeal seems to lie in the nerdy and quirky characters, oddly catchy music and phrases, absurd situations, and retro styles. With a budget of merely \$400,000 and box office receipts totaling more than \$40 million, *Napoleon Dynamite* was considered a success (Associated Press 2006), thus signaling that something about the nerd discourses spoke to audiences. The film also had a merchandising scheme (see Wasko 1994; Meehan 2005) similar to larger box office hits, consisting of T-shirts, key chains, magnets, notebooks, and so on, with stills from the film as well as sound bites such as “Freakin’ idiot,” “Yessss,” “Heck yes,” “Sweet,” “Lucky,” “Vote for Pedro,” and “Whatever I feel like I wanna do. Gosh!” (*Napoleon Dynamite Merchandise* 2007). While consumers are used to film companies selling Batman sheets and Disney princess lunchboxes, the selling of “nerd paraphernalia” might be situated in a slightly different vein. What does it mean to consume nerddom? If consumers and fans buy merchandise to build a relationship between themselves and a film or television brand (Klein 2000; Meehan 2005), we could assume that the consumption of nerd toys indicates a willingness to further define one’s identity vis-à-vis the culture of *Napoleon Dynamite* consumption. However, the contours of that consumption remain fuzzy, in that the consumption of the film and its merchandise may not signal an easy “celebration” of nerd identity. Rather, it may indicate a simultaneous affirmation and disavowal. The most popular scene in the film is where Napoleon Dynamite performs a moon-boot-clad disco dance to the ’80s hit “Axel F” for the school’s talent show. Kids

across the nation learned the dance and performed it at their own talent shows, uploading to YouTube. And the video game *World of Warcraft* features a Napoleon Dynamite dance for male blood elf characters. The sequence and its popularity illustrate the performative contrast between dominant masculinity and requisite physical abilities and a subordinate nerd masculinity and its inability to accomplish coordinated dance movements. The popular imitation and adaptation of the sequence is instructive: Audiences clearly engaged the nerd masculinity. But to what end? Were “real nerds” replicating the dance in celebration of nerd identity, or was it their more popular counterparts who allowed themselves to “play nerd” as a way to reaffirm their own non-nerdiness, or alternately to try on a different type of masculinity or identity? The same question should be asked of girls donning tight T-shirts reading “I love nerds,” which could be interpreted in a number of ways. First, they might really love nerds (which we might assume to be male). Second, they may not *truly* love nerds but could be signaling a questioning of dominant masculinity, in the same way that the imitative YouTube and *Warcraft* dances may function. Third, this might indicate that they do not love nerds or counterhegemonic masculinity at all and are wearing the T-shirt in a parodic fashion.

Rather than reading the expansive trend in “nerd culture” as a recuperation of dominant masculinities and femininities, pockets of popular discourse are arguing that nerdy is the new “cool”—that there has been a subversion of the hip/square dialectic. Take, for example, the character of Seth Cohen (played by Adam Brody) on the hit youth television series *The O.C.*, which ran on Fox from 2003 to 2007. Cohen plays the square to Ryan Atwood’s (played by Ben McKenzie) hipster in the affluent Orange County, California. The show portrays Cohen as a somewhat geeky teen, especially in his subordinate power relationships with other characters in the hierarchy of teen social groups. His squareness is marked by a love for comic books, sci-fi, drawing, and Converse All Stars, the shoe of nonjock kids everywhere. However, the character has access to higher social circles, including a popular girlfriend. In a Joel Stein interview with Adam Brody, the two attempt to reframe the character’s nerd persona:

“Comic books aren’t nerdy. You’d have to be an idiot to think computers are nerdy. The nerd now is the Bush Administration-supporting, anti-intellectual dumb ass” [said Brody]. Whether that’s true or not, it’s clear the once desirable macho-jock type hasn’t got such pull. There’s a reason the Rock and Vin Diesel haven’t filled the gap left by Schwarzenegger and Stallone: nobody minds the gap. And in a world without heroes, as the movie trailer voice-over guy might say, the slightly awkward can be slightly cool. (Stein 2007, 85)

The transposition of nerd as hip, jocks and “anti-intellectual dumb asses” as square, attempts to refigure the concept of “nerd” by repositioning the old nerd as the new hegemony of cool, and by extension, cool masculinity. Also note that Stein marks the character as “slightly” awkward and “slightly” cool. On *The O.C.*, Seth Cohen is not a complete outcast but rather a semipopular, witty, wealthy, cute character who dresses

very stylishly and who does, in fact, “get the girl,” the popular one at that (character Summer Roberts). The interview attempts to depict a nonhegemonic masculinity, yet is its transgressive potential deflated by marking it also as “cool”—the blessing of mainstream commodity culture, which has also been evidenced in the *Napoleon Dynamite* merchandising scheme above?

To build on Brody’s computer comment above, technology once associated with nerds is now seen as hip, as the semiotic codes of nerd, Brody and Stein’s argument goes, have been switched. Many people who would not fit the old nerd mold spend time online—whether on video games, social networking sites, Twitter, or email—wait online for the iPhone or are committed to their BlackBerry. As technologies are diffused, they can be seen along the lines of barbecues or lawnmowers; as Eglash (2002) contends, they become incorporated into mainstream culture, and thus mainstream or dominant gender lines. As computer and digital technologies are adopted by businesses and mass marketed to the public, such technologies have become more socially acceptable and less nerd identified. This does not mean that programming robot monkeys with lasers, developing algorithms, and Linux have shed their nerd connection but that the line between “computer geek” and “geek chic” has become blurred through commodification and an attempt to resituate discourses of techno-masculinity.

We can witness the attempt to play with the hip/square dialectic vis-à-vis technology in Apple’s Mac commercials. The aesthetically plain commercials that place the “Mac guy” at odds with the “PC guy” are set in front of a white screen, with simple music in the background. This aesthetic mimics the simplicity and nontekkie ease that marketers attempt to construct about Mac—both in its look and its “user-friendly” functions. The PC guy is a square—an anxious, pudgy older guy in a suit, while the Mac guy is a hip jeans-and-sneakers-wearing young man with a nonchalance that exudes “cool.” In this move, Mac as hipster/PC as square works to identify Mac with young and tech-savvy culture. Thus, we understand how marketers are rebranding cool onto a traditionally nerdy pastime. Frank (1997, 4) articulates this move:

[R]ebel youth culture remains the cultural mode of the corporate moment, used to promote not only specific products but the general idea of life in the cyber-revolution. Commercial fantasies of rebellion, liberation, and outright “revolution” against the stultifying demands of mass society are commonplace almost to the point of invisibility in advertising, movies, and television programming.

Through the commodification of dissent, corporations create a “fake counterculture, a commercial replica that seemed to ape its every move for the titillation of the TV-watching millions and the nation’s corporate sponsors” (Frank 1997, 7). If we believe Brody and Stein, and if Mac commercials are correct, and if the cult popularity of *Napoleon Dynamite* indicates a new triumph of the nerd, then we should see a general cultural embracing of the nerd, in Frank’s “fake counterculture” of geek chic or the technosexual. By analyzing several reality TV phenomenon, we are able to explore the tensions between “geek chic” and more caustic visions of nerddom.



## Reality TV Nerds

Reality TV is a ubiquitous television genre, spawning multiple subgenres and categories such as the docu-soap and game-doc (Murray and Ouellette 2004; Hill 2005). It is important to understand “reality TV” as a constructed genre (Mittell 2004) in relation to political-economic factors in the television industry, including rising production costs, the drive for international markets, and imminent labor and strike issues that have encouraged producers and networks to look toward unscripted, nonunion programs (Raphael 2004). The reality TV genre is important in this study not merely because it is a growing genre nor simply because of its apparent popularity with viewing audiences and producers alike. Rather, in its performance of the real (Roscoe 2004), this genre makes cultural appeals to reality and interactivity while simultaneously committing acts of cultural surveillance (Andrejevic 2004) against gendered or racialized identities. Such a context has implications for the dispersal of cultural power through identity construction around the discourse and performance of the nerd.

Analyzing the reality TV nerd includes Kim’s (2004) reality TV transformation myths. Kim identifies how reality TV employs the myth of transformation through assimilation, a show of gratitude, a sympathetic backstory, and/or a strong work ethic—contestants who play into gendered and racialized cultural tropes are more likely to be rewarded by institutional mechanisms, including voting patterns. A prominent feature figures into these reality TV transformation texts: humor. The analysis examines the ways in which nerds are often presented in flux, in a process of transforming from nerd to jock, or from uncool to cool—a project that should be contextualized via the historical representations presented earlier in this article. The politics of humor are examined to add depth to an understanding of the discourses of nerds on reality shows and in life, especially in terms of the containment of their transgressive potential to critique hegemonic masculinity (outlined in Kendall 1999a, 1999b). The moments deserving of close analysis are *So You Think You Can Dance* (Fox, 2005–; *SYTYCD*) final nerd hip-hop dance by Travis and Benji; William Hung, *American Idol* (Fox, 2002–) reject turned nerd superstar; and the WB/CW program *Beauty and the Geek* (2005–8) and its array of male geeks and ditzy female beauties. The following section interrogates the representation of geek chic, the raced, gendered, sexual reality TV nerd, and his role in normativizing white patriarchal heterosexual masculinity in commercial reality TV through the still prevalent hip/square dialectic.

### *Tranji: The Nerd Dance*

The economics of television dictate that summer schedules are the home for repeats, movies, and now reality TV. Carter (2006) writes that the major networks have decided to promote reality programming in the summer; in a season when audiences are less tuned in to television, reality TV accomplishes two economic goals: it garners higher ratings than reruns, yet costs significantly less than original drama and comedy programming. Fox began airing the reality dance competition show *SYTYCD* in the summer of 2005 and, in finding it lucrative, reordered the program for each summer

thereafter, in 2009 ordering two seasons, to extend the program into the fall lineup. Coproduced by Nigel Lythgow, one of *American Idol*'s originators, who also acts as a judge, the program had the political-economic clout to be green-lit; the show is formatted and is now franchised to a number of countries around the world. The American show was an instant hit, helping place Fox in the winning slot for the eighteen to forty-nine and eighteen to thirty-four demographics (Atkinson 2006). Its ratings for the summer were consistently high (Kissell 2006a, 2006b; Atkinson 2006), and the season finale helped Fox win that week's ratings war.

Like several other reality TV programs, and in particular the ones discussed in this analysis, *SYTYCD* is a competitive reality game show, where unpaid contestants compete to win a prize: in this case, a professional job in a top dance company, cash, and a car. The dancers act as the central labor for the show, accompanied by several judges, a host, and a team of professional choreographers. Throughout the season, the cast of "girls" and "guys" pairs up every week to perform in different dance styles, from modern to ballroom, contemporary interpretive pieces, and various subgenres of hip-hop. A stable of choreographers work with dancers, before dancers go before the judges and America to prove their accomplishments on the first show of the week. The lowest scoring dancers "dance for their lives," a solo routine, to prove their capabilities; the loser is ejected from the week's second show. Of course, the "couples" paired throughout the season are always male-female partnerships. However, in the season finales, we are treated to a reality TV "twist"—the two women and two men each have to dance with each other. The 2006 male finalists (season finale aired August 16, 2006), Benji Schwimmer and Travis Wall, come to be known collectively as "Tranji." This moniker and its odd sound point to the show's inability to take seriously two men dancing together; ironically, it evokes "trannie," or "transgendered," though certainly Fox did not intend that connection.

The two white dancers enter the stage when a school bell rings. They are dressed as prototypical "nerds"—shorts, tube socks, strange hats, broken glasses, and very full backpacks. They bumble around stiffly. When the music starts, however, they catch the beat by thrusting their pelvises, looking surprised, as the song "Gyrate" (by Da Muzicianz, featuring Mr. ColliPark) instructs them. They rip off their button-down shirts, lose the glasses, and proceed smoothly as professional hip-hop dancers. At the end of the song, the school bell rings again, and they pick up their backpacks and return to bumbling nerd status.

I am interested here in how the "transformation" of the nerd through hip-hop reveals the racialized nature of sexuality deployed by the social construct of the nerd and the antagonistic hip/square dialectic. To address this concern, we can begin by acknowledging that the role of hip-hop in this performance is that of a sexualizing force, as the title of the song, "Gyrate," suggests. **The white nerds channel an imagined black sexuality through the infectious music and dance, instantly transforming themselves into spectacular hip-hop attractions, displaying fluid, libidinal movement and cutting-edge dance moves.** The awkward physicality of the nerd is lost to the mesmerizing street moves of the newly transformed hip-hop wonders. Such a "transformation" reifies the hypersexualization of black masculinity and compulsory African American cool

(Young 2007; Eglash 2002). In so doing, this dance reifies Young's double bind of "nigga-gender" of black men while co-constructing and disavowing the "faggot-gender" in a homophobic move (Young 2007).

At the same time, and in a more abstract sense, the Tranji dance reifies the erasure of black academic success, with the denial of the imagined black nerd. **A black nerd is unable to remain "black" while taking on nerd qualities—in embracing the "white" nerd culture, he loses cultural capital in black circles for "acting white"—a phenomenon that is borne out in decades of sociological research** (Tyson and Darity 2005). The white nerds return at the end of the skit like Cinderella after the ball, to resume their sexless, cerebral lives. To further problematize this text, one might note that the architect of this dance is famous black hip-hop choreographer–dancer Shane Sparks. Sparks's regular contributions to *SYTYCD* also landed him a spot on *America's Best Dance Crew* (MTV, 2008–) and the admiration of many *SYTYCD* judges, dancers, and viewers. Here, authorship for Tranji becomes even more textured, as it can be read as a black imagining of failed white nerd transformation through the appropriation of hip-hop.

**In shifting to the second trajectory, humor, we can look to Tranji's "goofiness" to think through how humor is used to depoliticize those racial, sexual dimensions of the dance.** In training and outtakes, both dancers play up their goofiness, seemingly to deflect the homophobic fear of performing as a same-sex dance couple. Schwimmer twice tells the camera that he is going to show off his "sweet moves"—a phrase that was popularized by Napoleon Dynamite's dance sequence, discussed above. When choreographer Shane Sparks tells the dancers to move closer so their "butts touch," they roll their eyes and actually move *away* from each other—a recuperative moment given the pictures of Wall in drag circulating the internet during the season, as fans debated whether Wall was gay or not; when this clip is played for the audience, everyone laughs. Throughout, the audience and judges scream with glee while engrossing themselves in Tranji's visual and kinesthetic transformation. Is the laughter based on the sheer physical awkwardness of the nerd (glasses, tube socks, heavy backpack, goofy facial expression)—a laughter that comes at the expense of the social outcast that simply does not fit the dominant culture's ideal of masculinity? Or is the laughter based on the fact that this is a *fantasy*—that it is impossible for a real white nerd to transform himself into the stereotyped black sexual being? Or, more insidiously, are the laughter and glee based on the titillating thrill of the imagined white transformation to blackness, the desire to appropriate black culture at will, to experience the media-represented notions of black male sexuality, which is imbued with stereotypes long visible in American culture; a construct of sexuality that devalues and objectifies? In each formulation, we are left with an appropriation, not a sharing of hip-hop cultures born out of unity in struggle in black culture and politics (see, e.g., Kitwana 2005), and the uneasy racialized hip/square dynamic. If we bring Sparks to bear again as the choreographer, the failed transformation may represent a return of the social order of black masculinity, itself a troubled construct (Young 2007). Thus, this performance casts serious doubt on the transformation of the nerd into a hipster, and of the transcendence of the hip/square dialectic, and holds obvious implications for solidifying dangerous discourses of racialized and homophobic masculinities.

The cultural imprint of the Tranji dance, and of the continued performance of nerd identity through dance, can be seen in later reality dance moments that reiterate the transformation theme, but through the relationship with hypersexual women. On dance competition show *America's Best Dance Crew*, several nerd dances deploy this trope. Season 2's (2008, episode 4) multicultural crew Phresh Select dressed as nerds attempting to woo a black mannequin, while dancing to hip-hop song "Shawty's a 10," combining nerdy costumes and comedic suspender-snapping motions with b-boy moves; they fail in their attempts to bring the mannequin alive, thus reifying frustrated nerd sexuality (*America's Best Dance Crew*, Phresh Select/Speed-up challenge, July 10, 2008). On *America's Best Dance Crew* season 1 (2008), crews were given movie characters to embody through dance. Kaba Modern, a crew consisting of three Asian American women and three Asian American men from Orange County, California, had to embody "popular girls" and "geek boys" to Snoop Dogg's song "Sensual Seduction." The three men dress as nerds, the women as prostitutes, hanging on street lights. The dance involves the temporary transformation of the geeks through their encounter with the sexually charged women, whom it turns out they created through their computers (*America's Best Dance Crew*, Kaba Modern/Movie character challenge, February 28, 2008). The Asian-nerd male and the exoticized Asian female are reified in this dance—tropes to which we return momentarily. Season 2 of *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* (CTV, 2009) contained a jazz-funk geek dance with Jayme Rae Daily and Everett Smith, choreographed by Canada's season 1 winner Nico Archambault and colleague Wynn Holmes. Like Kaba Modern's dance, the "bad girl" seduces the bookish nerd in this piece (*So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, Jayme Rae Daily/Everett Smith, jazz-funk, October 9, 2009).

Thus, the reality dance world is articulating the performance of nerd identity in a way that reifies ideological structures—the failed transformation of racialized masculinity and lack of sexual prowess. Audiences embrace these performances: one fan posting on fan site *Pure So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, commented on the Jayme Rae/Everett nerd dance:

If Nico's choreo can't keep these two out of the bottom 2 I don't know what can. . . . Nico's debut as a choreo on the show was AMAZING. . . . I loved it as much as I love him !!! Everett was the perfect geek and Jayme Rae sexy as sexy can be. The story was cute, the moves were amazing it was a well-crafted routine from idea to performance. (Mandy 2009)

Dancers themselves embrace and choreograph the nerd dance, and we see this reiterated across multiple dances and programs, with varying iterations of racial and sexualized discourses.

### *William Hung and the Spectacle of Losing*

Many reality shows are highly invested in the spectacle of competition, as implied in the previous dance analysis, and in the ritual casting away of the losers. An array of

language and gimmicks is used to whittle down the cast to the last woman or man standing, as hosts use such phrases as “booted off,” “eliminated,” “sent home,” “voted off,” and “evicted” or curtly tell contestants “you just don’t measure up,” “auf wiedersehen,” “ciao,” or “you’re fired!” The spectacle of losing, and what I call “loser celebrity,” has been incorporated into the success of *American Idol* in a comprehensive way (a programming model increasingly followed by other programs, such as *SYTYCD*). Fox’s popular reality show *American Idol*, part of Britain’s *Pop Idol* franchise, searches for the next singing sensation in a competitive reality show format. The first portion of the season consists of auditions in a number of American cities, followed by semifinals, from which the final contestants are chosen. Like *SYTYCD*, *Idol* airs twice a week, securing ratings for Fox through monopolizing the audience for multiple time slots of performance shows and results episodes. The political economy of this show is facilitated by the contracts that bind the singers to the producers’ own labels, thus indenturing them and keeping the profits in-house, as well as the live postseason tour. The *American Idol* brand is strong, with stars such as Kelly Clarkson, Clay Aiken, Carrie Underwood, and Chris Daughtry producing high album sales and Jennifer Hudson going on to win an Academy Award for her performance in *Dreamgirls* (2006). In 2007, *Idol* spun off a second series, *The Next Great American Band* (Fox, 2007), while judge Randy Jackson is the producer of popular MTV dance show *America’s Best Dance Crew*, discussed above.

*American Idol* has been able to further profit by stretching its season; it doubles the length of the season by airing the nationwide traveling auditions, Hollywood semifinals, the final thirty-six, and the final twelve, all before the “real” competition among the final ten airs. Needing to fill so many hours of programming, the series not only showcases a nation of talented contestants but also highlights and even encourages embarrassing and poor auditions by performers, some of whom are simply deluded about the level of their talent, while others hope to infiltrate the program with particularly bad singing, swear words, crazy outfits, or other bizarre shticks, with no hope of actually making the final group. The number of “joke” auditions seems to be on the rise, with people seeking self-promotional opportunities at every corner. In season 8 (2009), Nick Mitchell and his stage character Norman Gentle made it very far in the competition, despite the persona’s distinct “uncool” factor. Wearing a terry-cloth sweatband, shiny shirts, athletic shorts, worn sneakers, Norman Gentle would comedically address the audience in a cabaret style verging on drag show, to the delight of the audience. Simon Cowell, the “lead” judge, referred to his performance style as “horrific comedy” (*American Idol*, Norman Gentle performance, February 25, 2009), encouraging viewers to get rid of the singer.

In fact, many audience members watch the audition episodes to see the “losers,” even more so than previewing the potential winners. Thousands of YouTube and other vlog postings feature the worst auditions, viewer comments attached. Even *Idol* itself counts down the “top worst auditions” of the season, and judges’ witty “rejection banter” has become a trademark element of the show. Is the rejection all just fun and games, though? William Hung, from *American Idol* season 3 (2004), is an interesting case. An American engineering student originally from Hong Kong, Hung

unsuccessfully auditioned before the judges in San Francisco. Known as the “Hong Kong Ricky Martin,” Hung has crafted a career out of being an *American Idol* reject. He has sold over 240,000 CDs globally (Navarro 2007), has toured Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan, has appeared as a keynote speaker at graduations, and has wall-papers and e-cards available on his web site, [williamhung.net](http://williamhung.net) (Chuah 2004). His loser–success, however, must be examined in more depth.

On *Idol* (William Hung audition, January 15, 2004), Hung enters the judging room, the embodiment of the “Asian nerd,” wearing a Hawaiian print shirt, slicked back hair, buck teeth, and thick glasses, and begins singing Ricky Martin’s “She Bangs.” His square appearance, accent, and awkward dance moves are egged on by the judges, at once humoring themselves at his inability to deliver a convincing pop star performance and creating content for weeks of audition programs. Cowell rolls his eyes and rubs his forehead in frustration. Judge Randy Jackson covers his face with a piece of paper, his body visibly shaking with laughter. Judge Paula Abdul bounces her foot while she smiles and makes eyes with Cowell. After Cowell silences Hung, Jackson continues to chuckle.

Simon: You can’t sing, you can’t dance. So what do you want me to say?

Hung: [pause] Um, I already gave my best. And I have no regrets at all.

Randy and Paula: Good for you. That’s good.

Paula: That’s the best attitude yet.

Hung: You know, I have no professional training. Of singing. Or dancing.

Simon: No! Well, there’s the surprise of the century! (*American Idol*, William Hung audition, January 15, 2004)

Why, then, has William Hung been granted such fame? It is clear that Hung’s infamy, as the Hong Kong Ricky Martin, is performed and discounted vis-à-vis racialized and sexualized discourses. Much like the contrast illustrated with Tranji and black hip-hop sexuality versus the white nerd, the Hung example positions as opposites the suave and sensual Latin lover and the asexual Asian nerd. Hung’s inability to personify the Latin lover role marks his failed masculinity, and marks this failure as “Asian.” Such failure was indicated briefly above, in the Kaba Modern “geek boys/popular girls” dance example, where the Asian male geek synthetically creates a sensual counterpart because of his lack of prowess. This dynamic must be more fully explored here.

Stephanie Greco Larson (2006, 72) writes that ridiculing the Asian nerd has historically functioned to assuage white fear: “Laughing at these characters diffused the competitive threat that whites felt at that time from high-achieving Asian Americans. White viewers were invited to continue to feel superior to these ridiculous characters.” In this move, humor detracts from political stakes. Hung’s accent and nonnative use of the English language function as points of racist humor in this clip, and in his ensuing “success.” Says one college student after buying the Hung CD, “Hung had an accent that made ‘Hotel California’ sound priceless” (Abrams 2007).

These elements work together to remind Hung and his Asian counterparts that to win a pop contest, one must lose the accent and the outfit and conform to a standard of

sexualized masculinity, in this case the stereotype of the Latin lover, to woo women. Otherwise, the seeming asexuality of the Asian nerd prevents his success. Ironically, the Latin lover image failed for season 8 (2009) *Idol* contestant Jorge Nunez of Puerto Rico. Nunez was told he was *too Latin*—his Puerto Rican dance moves were laughed at and condescended to, and his Spanish accent was decidedly “too thick.” After being sent to accent neutralization classes so that his singing voice sounded more English, Nunez was voted off the program around the same time Tatiana Del Toro (also originally from Puerto Rico) was accused of “faking” a Spanish accent to get the same attention given to Nunez.

Hung as Asian minstrel does not play to all audiences, however. An online poll asks, “Is William Hung’s appeal rooted in racism?” The answers break down as follows:

- Yes, he plays to an enduring, ineffectual anti-Asian image—40%
- No. He bangs!—41%
- That’s for William to decide—11%
- Can’t we all just sing along?—8%
- Total votes: 2,747 (Guillermo 2004)

The results of this survey suggest that the audience response to Hung’s performance and celebrity is fairly divided, but if one aggregates the answers, many more people continue to laugh off this persona and the issue of racism; only 40% see his success having to do with racism, 60% say no. Why people have sidelined racism could be related to the fact that “losers” are a common staple in reality TV. Some writers have pointed to the growth of “the cult of bad art” such as these reality TV losers as “an invitation to escape the formal boundaries of adulthood and be a child, delighting in the rude and raw” (White 2006, 26). This may be an explanation for why people love to watch *Jackass* (MTV, 2000–2002) or blow up TV remotes in the microwave, or even to love to hate “bad” acts such as William Hung. *Idol* fan site Vote for the Worst ([www.votefortheworst.com](http://www.votefortheworst.com)) takes the cult of bad art very seriously, attempting to critique the commercial nature of reality TV and the music industry by organizing votes to support the worst contestant rather than the best. However, when “bad art” is defined along racialized lines, one cannot escape the racial dimensions of loving to laugh at the Orientalized Other as nerd/loser, in a moment of mass hip/square antagonism. Hung’s failure to transform into the Latin lover signals a hip/square division rooted, in this instance, in historical racial discourses that are beyond bad art. When viewed alongside Kaba Modern and other social Asian nerd discourses, this critique gains more weight.

### *Beauties versus Geeks*

The American reality competition program *Beauty and the Geek*, produced by Ashton Kutcher and Jason Goldberg of MTV’s *Punk’d* (2003–7), originally aired in the United States on the WB; it was one of the programs picked up when the WB and

UPN merged into a new network, the CW, and subsequently aired for three more seasons until its current status as “on hiatus.” Its pretext is to put a group of male nerds (“geeks”) and female “beauties” together in a house and encourage them to learn from each other and transform themselves through competitive tasks, with the losing teams (consisting of one beauty and one geek each) heading off in a trivia challenge that determines which couple goes home. In this show, the team that makes the biggest transformation wins. The goal, as the network describes, is “pairing eight gorgeous but academically impaired women with eight brilliant but socially challenged men to test intellect and social skills. . . . [T]he geek tries to pass brains on to the beauty, while the beauty helps the geek overcome social awkwardness. At the end of the eight-week series, each contestant comes out a changed person” (CW 2007).

One television reviewer claims that it is “one of the few reality shows with a good heart. . . . [I]t has some of the dumb humor of an *American Pie* movie, but raised to a higher plateau by our nation’s creed of self-improvement” (People 2006). A second reviewer characterizes it as “sweet, funny and virtually humiliation free” (Bianco 2005), a third as “sweet, low-key” (Arthur 2006, 37). These popular characterizations of self-improvement and humiliation-free reproduce the show’s stated goals and altruism and seem to suggest that the show would fall into the hip/square friendship dialectic. However, these comments fail to dig deeper into the show’s problematic construction of the beauty–geek contradiction and how it functions on the program and potentially in society, through the reification of the antagonistic hip/square dialectic and assumptions about nerd gender and sexuality.

*Beauty and the Geek* blatantly utilizes the hip/square dialectic, as well as the transformation myth, as spectacle and marketing hook. Although the producers claim to want to blur these boundaries and that the contestants are “more than beauties and geeks,” the starting point, and potentially the endgame, is still the same: a binary is created between intelligence and attractiveness or sexual viability. The questions here become, how are the beauty–nerd binaries created, how is a transformation of this binary represented, and to what end?

Important to keep in mind here is that the binary is more complicated than the show purports. To begin, the show puts “intelligent” at odds with both “beautiful” and “socially adept,” when the opposite of “intelligent” should simply be “unintelligent.” The show implies this when it states that the women are “academically impaired”—however, they are not academically impaired average-looking (or unattractive) women. Rather, “beautiful” is also added into the contradiction. Likewise, “socially awkward” is not the opposite of “gorgeous” or “unintelligent”—yet this, too, is a binary that the program establishes. In so doing, concepts are conflated and convoluted binaries created. The key to understanding the representations on *Beauty and the Geek* is that the show actually creates a series of negative dialectics between the beauty/women and the nerd/males. To deepen our understanding here, we might concede that the true contrast of the nerd persona is *not* the beautiful women of the show, as suggested by the program, but rather socially adept/attractive *males* displaying hegemonic masculinity. By eliding this fact, the show presents a troubled hip/square



pairing, with the imagined halves of both gendered pairs largely absent, forcing a convoluted comparison that allows both beauties and geeks to be ridiculed. These problems are illuminated below.

The premiere episode of each season shows the beauties and geeks meeting each other and being shocked at the opposites' strengths and weaknesses, including the nerdy look of the geeks. We see here many white nerds and several Asian nerds. The show hosts no black or Latin nerds. They are shown talking about math, science, computers, and nerd-cultural referents such as *Star Trek*. Beauties are more diverse, though the first to be evicted are the women of color. The last women standing are all blondes (*Beauty and the Geek*, season 3, 2007). They are introduced by talking about their looks and partying. One season has a twist, where one team comprises a male beauty/female geek team, which is deliberately used as a "twist," in essence reifying nerd as male, beauty (and sex object) as female while at the same time claiming to undermine the assumption. This moment is where the show's odd dichotomy and negative dialectic become more apparent—the inclusion of a macho social male provides the visual stand-in for what is usually absent from the program. Here, nerd masculinity is contrasted with hegemonic masculinity quite frankly.

Nerd masculinity is also placed in disfavor when early in the season, the "ugly," socially unacceptable nerd is made over, with a stylish haircut, shave, and wardrobe change, and told to ditch the Rubik's cube in an attempt to become more attractive. The physical transformation is highlighted, in a typical makeover-and-reveal scenario found on many talk and reality shows (Quail, Razzano, and Skalli 2005). **The nerds are then schooled in "love" and "courtship," as their failures in these realms are prerequisites for nerd masculinity.** They are taught, by experts and the "beauties," how to behave on a date with a woman and how to throw a party, order wine, and decorate a house, and they learn the ins and outs of celebrity pop culture—ostensibly the domains of the "beautiful." The beauties are taught how to read maps, lead tours, paddle canoes, conduct interviews, locate library books, and debate politics—the supposed domain of the nerd. However, from this list, we can see that the represented knowledges of "nerd culture" in these tasks are actually knowledges essential to a normal life and in some cases demonstrate confidence and leadership, whereas the knowledges of the beauty may be "fun" but are more trivial and of little consequence. In pitting these knowledges as opposites, the show utilizes problematic gender and sexual representations: the nerds appear to really only be looking for a sexual conquest through their "party" knowledge imparted by the beauties, which would theoretically assist their sexual prowess and conquest of women. In exchange, the beauties are also ridiculed for their stupidity and inability to perform simple chores such as locating a library book. In this way, the show troubles a basic hip/square reading through condemning both nerd masculinity and "party girls" or "airheads" for their failure to live up to traditional gender roles.

Given this conundrum, it is instructive to examine the transformations requested of the contestants, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality. In season 3 (2007), runners-up Nate and Cecile are passed over for the final prize because Cecile does not

“transform.” In several on-screen interviews, Cecile boasts that she is no different than when she walked into the game—she is selfish, greedy, and insensitive. Her honest admission of the failure to transform causes her team to lose the game, as well as the respect of her fellow contestants. Her admission points to the problems of transformation in this commercial context: besides the superficiality of the tasks and “changes,” the artifice must remain just that, and those who reveal it must be punished. She loses not only because she does not “transform” but also more importantly because she exposes the transformation process as a fraud, thus undermining the stated goals of the show. The gender implications in this failure are apparent—she solidifies a stereotype of a “mean girl” or “bitch,” who is ultimately punished for operating outside the bounds of appropriate femininity. In this way, the show suggests that proper femininity includes sensitivity, selflessness, and helpfulness—along with beauty, social skills, and an acceptable level of intelligence. Conversely, Nate, in his changes to style and culture, has demonstrated all the requisite transformations and is being held back by his partner, who has not.

As in the previous case studies, humor is employed in this show, depoliticizing its gendered, sexualized dimensions. The beauties constantly ridicule the geeks, and vice versa. **The geeks’ dress, lack of sexual experience, not knowing what “booty” is, hyperintelligence are all points of laughter and dismissal of their worth—as men, as potential love interests, and essentially as human beings.** When they are shaven and changed into fashionable clothes, they begin to gain more respect from the women, as they conform to dominant society’s standards of appropriate male dress and personal care, and hence potential sexual partners worthy of the “beauties”’ attention.

Titillation arises when on season 3 (*Beauty and the Geek*, season 3, 2007) a budding geek–beauty romance occurs between Jennylee and Nate. **If the true test of transformation for failed nerd masculinity is to prove his heterosexual prowess and secure a romantic relationship with a woman, and the lessons learned from the beauties have been successful, this should not come as a surprise, despite the continually failed attempts that we witness in the nerd dances and singing above.** In fact, one fan notes that the reason she watches the show is in hopes of that potential beauty–geek romance or, ultimately, the sexual viability of the nerd:

I mean Jenny Lee and Nate. So cute. So effing cute it’s ridiculous. Somebody get me to the reunion show so I can see if the two of them are still together kind of cute. I’m a sucker for that, and *Beauty and the Geek* seems to reel me in year after year just on the premise that some “beauty” ends up “shipping with one of the geeks.” I don’t have a good reason for why this is such a draw for me but it is. (Bloody Munchkin 2007)

While one cannot assume the entire viewership shares this perspective, this fan’s desire for a beauty–geek romance demonstrates her social investment in sexualizing the nerd via a beautiful woman, which does not really mean the transcendence

of the stereotype but rather the resurgence of masculinity as sexual conquest via a transformation to hegemonic masculinity (as also implied in the dances above). And not just any conquest, but that of a highly attractive, hence socially desirable, woman—even if she is “stupid” or “mean,” thus devaluing a woman as a whole person and instead seeing her as a potential conquest.

To more fully explore the troubled beauty–geek imprint of the hip/square dialectic, it is useful to uncover how it has been utilized on another reality show, this time focusing solely on women, which presents an interesting comparison with the previous example. *Canada’s Next Top Model* (CTV, 2006–) cycle 3, episode 6 (*Canada’s Next Top Model*, Bright lights, no pity, June 30, 2009) includes a competition in which the models must produce a dual-image photo of themselves as stunning divas and their “alter egos,” defined as humble, hard-working, nerdy assistants. The show plays into the transformation myth quite specifically, by stating, “Transforming from ‘geek’ to ‘chic’ requires being able to relate to both of the characters” (Block 2009). However, rather than “relate” to both characters, the models and the program articulate what can be seen as a tyranny of chic, where the transformation narrative privileges the diva/chic and disavows the nerd, as seen in the following quotes from the program’s own materials:

Nikita [a model] had to go from a *nerdy* photographer to a *glamorous* diva being photographed and was drawing on inspiration from Marilyn Monroe for the latter.

“She was kind of *nerdy*, not really into herself, and *really into her work*,” said [model] Linsay. “And then my second persona was like the typical diva, loving herself and nobody else and like, ‘Yeah that’s right, *pamper me*.’”

“The *nerdy* is kind of my everyday life—like I got to wear my own glasses, they told me they were nerdy enough. I just embodied some of the stuff, like I was a nerd in junior high and whatever, and then I pulled out some diva moves, really *haute couture* model,” said [model] Meaghan.

“The fact that it’s a *rags to riches* kind of photo shoot—from *nothing to top model*—and you know it’s the same as the process that we’ve been on since we got here. We all came in here not knowing anything and now we’re on our way to being a top model,” [Meghan] said. (Block 2009, emphasis added)

Here, I have emphasized how “nerd” is coded as “humble,” “rags,” “not into themselves,” “really into their work,” and “nothing,” contrasted with the beauty/diva roles of “glamorous,” “haute couture,” “into themselves,” “pampered,” “riches,” and “top model.” The assumption here is a female nerd is distinctly unaesthetic and must be transformed immediately (as the online reference to “pasty whales” above suggests; Kendall 1999b). Of course, a show about modeling is unable or unwilling to critique cultural

beauty standards and the beauty and fashion industries, but there is no discussion in the program's materials regarding the constructedness of both divas and nerds, despite the obvious playing with or performing multiple identities, both diva and assistant. Instead, the discourse focuses on the necessary transformation of the nerdy woman assistant to the glamorous diva model, leaving the (implicitly intelligent, hard-working) nerd behind as an unwanted, undesirable identity. This is particularly troubling when we recall that these are female nerds. The nerd knowledge here is not math or science related but rather photography and personal assisting. This has particular implications for the construction of the female nerd, whose definition seems to be, according to this show, anything other than supermodel. Such a wide swath constructs any professional woman as a nerd by default, having severe implications for the worth of women's work and a societal overemphasis on beauty.<sup>2</sup>

In this section, then, we have seen how the reality TV nerd is pitted against beauty, in another inflection of nerd sexuality. In some instances, programs claim that "self-improvement" is the goal, and others "rags to riches." Both imprints require the male and female nerd to conform to gendered social and aesthetic standards that lend themselves to consumptive practices and hegemonic genders.

## **Conclusion: The Tyranny of Hip**

In the end, the "tyranny of hip" forces even nerd identity to attempt to transform, though a nexus of hegemonic identity construction and commercial culture obsessed with a masculinity that emphasizes sexual prowess and conquest. In each of the reality TV examples—Tranji and the nerd dance, William Hung and the "losers" of reality TV, and *Beauty and the Geek*—we witness the uneasy transformation of the nerd via the hip/square dialectic. This transformation is raced, gendered, and/or sexualized through constructing false dichotomies that work to enable a spectacular transformation, or at least the potential transformation, of geek to chic, of square to hip, of "faggot-gender" to "nigga gender" (Young 2007). Such imagined transformations typically fail. Instead, we witness the reification of the Asian nerd, the denial of the black nerd, and the unspokeness of whiteness in nerd culture prevail. The hip/square dialectic seems to be highlighted, with the potential to bring counterhegemonic nerd identity into the fold, but fails by refusing to critique the dialectic itself or the oppressive discourses and material realities within which it works. Likewise, these moments cast serious doubt on actual cultural acceptance of the nerd as the new hipster or (a la Brody or the Mac commercials) and on the transcendence of the hip/square dialectic. Rather, these reality TV moments hold obvious implications for solidifying dangerous discourses of racialized and homophobic genders that seek to marginalize nerd masculinity as an undesirable "other."

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## Notes

1. For future research, the added dimension of Semitism should be examined in relation to the square identity. Sweathog Arnold Horshack, *Revenge of the Nerds*'s Lewis Skolnick, and Arvid on *Head of the Class* create a Jewish nerd can still be seen in some representation of nerds today. This representation works to reify the stereotypical alignment of Jewish maleness as an "other" masculinity, one that is often hyperintellectual and sexually inferior.
2. An additional reality show that reiterates the "dumb beauty" myth, but does not speak as clearly to nerd culture, is VH1's *America's Most Smartest Model*, hosted by Ben Stein, who attempts to discover an intelligent model—already pitting brains and beauty against one another. In season 1, episode 6 (2007), judge Santino Rice, a finalist on season 2 of Bravo's *Project Runway*, challenges the models to prove their intelligence by cutting out shapes and using them to construct an outfit. One contestant, known as Blonde Rachel, has particular trouble with the task. Rice says to the camera, "Watching some of the models in there work, really made my brain hurt. It's like, thank god they're good looking, 'cause if they didn't have that goin' for them, they'd be like a BLEEP [fuckin'] rock." Blonde Rachel contends, "Drawing a circle is not as easy as I thought it would be." Her partner, Daniel, replies, "She's just . . . retarded;" the other contestants say several times, "stupid Rachel," before she was eliminated that episode. Here, the representation reiterates the airheaded beauty stereotype. A fuller study of this program is in order but beyond the scope of this article, which is attempting to focus specifically on nerds.

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