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Author(s): Julie Bettie

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Women without Class: *Chicas, Cholas, Trash*, and the Presence/Absence of Class Identity

A cover story in the San Francisco *Examiner Magazine* (Wagner 1996) on the topic of “wiggas” (which, the article explains, is shorthand for “white niggas”) reads, “suburban kidz hip-hop across the color line.” The story is about white youth who appropriate hip-hop culture and perform “black” identity. The cover picture is a collage of magazine cutouts showing white kids with blue eyes and blond hair (functioning as a code for racial purity) wearing hip-hop fashion and standing in front of a white picket fence behind which sits a charming two-story house and an apple tree. Although there is a girl pictured on the front cover, girls are absent from the story itself.

In a 1993 episode of the TV talk show *Oprah* on the same topic, several groups of boys, white and black, sat on the stage. The audience was confounded by the white boys in hip-hop style who “grew up in ‘the ’hood” and by the young black man who, as one guest explained, “looks like he walked out of Eddie Bauer,” as participants debated what it meant to dress black or dress white. During the course of the hour-long program all parties failed to note that, race and ethnicity aside, these were different versions of *masculinity* and that girls were missing again from this story about “youth.” The “urban romanticism” and “masculinist overtones” (McRobbie 1991, 20) of subculture studies, where the supposedly gender-neutral term *youth* actually stands for male, are equally often present in popular culture and news media portrayals of youth. In order to envision themselves as class or racial/ethnic subjects in either site, girls must read themselves as boys.

But beyond the invisibility of gender, there is also a failure to “think class” with much clarity. On the *Oprah* show, as with the magazine cover, the same sets of binaries surface repeatedly: white is middle class is suburban; black is lower class is urban. But a slippage occurs where the class references are dropped out and white stands in for middle, where black stands in for lower, or where suburban stands in for white and urban for black. Class and race signifiers are melded together in such a way that “authentic” black, and sometimes brown, identity is imagined as lower class, urban, and often violent and male as well. These are the overly simplified

identity categories offered, but they do not reflect the complexity of life. Middle-class youth of color are missing, for example, as are multiracial/multiethnic identity and small-town or rural poverty. The racial/ethnic and class subject positions offered by the “identity formation material” (McRobbie 1994, 192) of popular culture often do not allow for more nuanced social locations.

In sharp contrast is Mary Pipher’s (1994) best-selling book on girls titled *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, which is a reversal of the *Examiner* story and the *Oprah* episode in that girls are present but race/ethnicity and class are not. The cover features a white, blue-eyed girl who appears innocent and vulnerable. The title refers to the story of Ophelia, from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which, Pipher explains, “shows the destructive forces that affect young women. As a girl, Ophelia is happy and free, but with adolescence she loses herself. When she falls in love with Hamlet, she lives only for his approval. She has no inner direction. . . . When Hamlet spurns her, . . . she goes mad with grief. Dressed in elegant clothes that weigh her down, she drowns in a stream filled with flowers” (20). The reason, according to Pipher, that there are so many “Ophelias,” or girls without selves, is that we live in a “girl-poisoning culture” (12). Contributing to the current moral panic about youth and fanning the flame of family values politics, Pipher, along with other moral entrepreneurs, decries elements of mass culture such as rap music, television, and pop psychology books as evidence that “our culture is at war with families” (quoted in Turner 1996, 4). Reminiscent of Carol Gilligan’s (1982) early work, gender appears here as the most significant dimension of girls’ selves, and race/ethnicity and class as dimensions of subjectivity are analytically subordinate to gender.

The observations I make in this article are based on my ethnographic study of working-class white and Mexican-American girls in their senior year of high school in a small town in California’s central valley. Where Pipher sees girls derailed by romance and mass culture, I see “changing modes of femininity” (McRobbie 1994, 157): a generation of young women, most of whom at no point expect or hope to be economically supported by a man. These were girls who knew from experience in their own families of origin that male wages cannot support families alone and that men cannot be counted on to meet their ideals of intimacy and egalitarianism in relationships. These were girls who saw that the men in their working-class community were often unemployed or underemployed and too often dealt with this hardship by abandoning their obligation and responsibilities to the women in their lives and to the children they helped create. These girls were not holding out for princes.

My title, "Women without Class," has multiple meanings. Most simply, it reflects my interest in young women from families of modest means and low educational attainment who therefore have little "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1984) to enable class mobility.¹ The other meanings of the title speak to the theory debates I engage and to which I already have alluded: a second meaning refers to the fact that class analysis and social theory have, until recently perhaps, remained insufficiently transformed by feminist theory, unable to conceptualize women as class subjects. Ignoring women's experience of class results in a profound androcentric bias such that women are routinely invisible as class subjects. In much leftist analysis women are assumed to be without class, as these theorists often seem unable to see the category "working class" unless it is marked white and male. Such biases promote the invisibility of both white women and women of color as class subjects.²

The failure to perceive women as class subjects, or as racial/ethnic subjects, has been part of the "youth and social class couplet" (McRobbie 1994) of subculture studies and the school ethnographies of cultural marxists.³ This bias is a consequence of two separate but related problems:

¹ Cultural capital refers to class-based knowledge, skills, linguistic and cultural competencies, and a worldview that is passed on via family; it is related more to educational attainment than to occupation. See Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 and Bourdieu 1984. Also see Lamont and Lareau 1988 for an overview of the multiple and contradictory uses of the concept, especially as applied to the United States.

² This has happened in various ways: e.g., women were included in class taxonomies without any theorization of gender, as in the early work of Erik Olin Wright (e.g., 1985), or, more simply, the category "working class" was invisible unless it was marked white, male, and/or blue-collar industrial, as indicated by studies of the working class that focused on men's lives or blue-collar labor (e.g., Gans 1962; Thompson 1963; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Howell 1973; Halle 1984; Ryan and Sackrey 1984). In other words, marxists were slow at times to recognize sex-segregated pink-collar occupations as working class and to explore the ways gender shapes class formation.

³ See Hall and Jefferson 1976; Willis 1977; Hebdige 1979. Cultural marxists' studies of subcultural meaning and style have hailed primarily from Great Britain, since in the United States such creative youth typically have been treated under the rubric of deviance and delinquency instead. (One exception is the study of gangs and the race and class consciousness of style in the work of James Diego Vigil [1988] and Martin Sanchez Jankowski [1991] and in Ferrel and Sanders's 1995 collection.) While girls largely have been missing from the ethnographic study of subcultures (McRobbie and Garber 1976 and McRobbie 1978 are early exceptions), there is a growing interest in them now. Ethnographic work and textual analyses of girls and subcultures, as well as studies of girls and of schooling, often overlap. See, e.g., McRobbie and McCabe 1981; McRobbie and Nava 1984; McRobbie 1991, 1994; Roman 1988 on girl punks; Rose 1990, 1994 on black women rappers; Walkerdine 1997 on girls and talent shows. See also Fregoso 1995 for a textual analysis of homegirls, *cholas*, and *pachucas* in *Mi Vida Loca*; and Lewis 1990 on girls' consumption of music videos.

(a) the focus on male (white and/or nonwhite) subjects and (b) the employment of conceptual schemes that fail to adequately explain the way women experience class and, further, render gender and race epiphenomenal to class formation. With regard to subculture studies, these biases can be seen not only in the focus primarily on male youth in public places but also in the use of normative conceptions of “class consciousness” that are defined by relations of production, by the focus on youth’s transition to work identity, and by the failure to consider gender, family futures and pasts, and racial/ethnic identity as shapers of class subjectivity.

Paul Willis’s classic work *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977) was a welcome improvement on earlier structural determinist arguments (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), as it offered the “relative autonomy of culture,” recognizing that structural forces are always mediated by a cultural milieu. Willis even recognized that part of that cultural milieu included gender meanings as he explained how the link between masculinity and manual labor inhibited male youth from an interest in other kinds of labor that they imagined as feminized and inferior. Further, Willis offered up racial meanings as part of the recipe, suggesting that the lads’ sense of white superiority “softened the blow” of their obtaining only working-class jobs. In so doing, he showed how cultural resources are used to make sense of inherited structural and material conditions.

But in the end Willis’s account failed feminism. He presented his male subjects “as though they were *the* working class” (Holland and Eisenhart 1990, 34), describing working-class culture as valuing manual labor and physical prowess, the sexual domination of women, and the oppression of people of color. In so doing Willis played down internal divisions along gender and racial/ethnic lines, remaining blind to gender- and racial/ethnic-specific culture and domains. Although he discussed the relevance of their meanings to the development of “the lads” class identity, his awareness of these organizing variables of inequality had no consequence for his overall theory. While he conceptualized class in the historic terms of class formation, he conceptualized race and gender as static, as essentially there rather than historically composed. He therefore failed an exploration of their co-creation with class. When analyzing class, he understood culture holistically as a set of expressive practices, but when speaking to gender and race/ethnicity, he saw culture as mere ideology masking the workings of class reproduction. In short, gender and race projects were not seen to be as central as class struggle.

Early feminist critiques of marxism sought to add considerations of “patriarchy” to analyses of capitalism, asserting that these dual systems were

separate but interacting (layered or additive). This too often led to a description of patriarchy as transhistorical and transcultural, while capitalism remained understood as historical, dynamic, and unfortunately gender neutral. But by 1975 Gayle Rubin had suggested that “sex/gender systems” were historically specific ways of organizing sexuality and reproduction, and, since then, many have worked to demonstrate the ways gender helps constitute class relations and vice versa, where gender is not assumed as an essential category prior to its historically specific and politically influenced emergence.⁴

Likewise, scholars of race and ethnicity, namely, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), have offered a parallel version of this with the concept “racial formation,” describing racial categories not as pre-existing but as emergent out of “racial projects” in which the content and salience of racial categories are politically constructed and which work to secure white privilege.⁵ The recent interest in the intersection of race, class, and gender occurs at two related levels: at the macro level of social formation, where these processes are mutually constitutive, and at the micro level of identity formation, where cultural meanings provide the material that make various subjectivities possible.

Ironically, some versions of feminism have been complicit in constructing women as without either class or racial/ethnic subjectivity. On a third level, then, my title considers debates *within* feminist theory and refers to feminist accounts that, while working as correctives to androcentric biases and class reduction, tend toward gender reductionism, focusing primarily on the differences between boys and girls or women and men and failing to account for gender differences *within* sex categories. Historically such studies have focused on white middle-class girls or women but have failed to define them as such. Thus, they too were perceived and presented not as class or racial/ethnic subjects but only as gendered. To be fair, race and class do appear in newer books on girls, but while race and class are named, often only gender is theorized.⁶ Race and class are too often presented as “categorical” (Connell 1987) variables, essentially there rather than created. Minimal attention is given to the ways in which race and class are politically, historically, and situationally constructed (and performed) in relation to gender.

⁴ Such work includes, among others, Zavella 1987; Acker 1988; Scott 1988; Stacey 1990; Chang 1994; Lowe 1996.

⁵ For accounts of the ways class hierarchy and racial order are mutually constitutive, see, e.g., Zavella 1987; Roediger 1991; Almaguer 1994.

⁶ See, e.g., Brown and Gilligan 1992; Orenstein 1994; Pipher 1994; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan 1995.

The critique of gender reductionism is, of course, old news in feminist theory, as the intervention of “third-world” feminism has long since posed serious challenges to the gendered subject of “white middle-class” feminism.⁷ Feminist work that is informed by the incisive race critique asserted (most often) by women of color has led to a clearer understanding of how multiple social formations and identities intersect. While third-world feminism has refused gender reductionism, exploring the variety of possible differences and similarities, divisions and alliances within the category Woman across race, ethnicity, nation, and sexuality, little attention has been paid to cross-racial analyses of class.⁸ Within contemporary feminist theory and empirical work there has been a trend toward dichotomizing white middle-class women and working-class women of color.⁹ What is designated as white (or sometimes Western) feminism is implicitly understood as middle class, while third-world feminism is implicitly working class. But few have offered a working-class feminism that would speak to the similarity of working-class experiences women might have across race and therefore teach us something about how class operates and would show the limits of similarities and therefore lend more clarity to how race operates independent of class and why it cannot be reduced to it.¹⁰ Within U.S. feminist theory, class as a topic seems tainted, perhaps perceived as outdated and unfashionable, relegated to prefeminist marxism or to socialist feminism (where too often race has been understood only as the difference of class, in the leftist tradition of reducing race to class).¹¹

⁷ Mohanty 1991 offers a definition of third-world women that parallels the way *women of color* is often used to designate a constituency of women who share a “common context of struggle.” Both terms are often meant to point to a community of potential alliances among women of color in the third world and in the United States. See also Hull, Scott, and Smith 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Anzaldúa 1987; Asian Women United of California 1989; Anzaldúa 1990.

⁸ While quantitative studies often compare race and class as “variables,” comparative ethnographic work is rarer. Notable exceptions include Higginbotham and Weber 1992; Luttrell 1993, 1997.

⁹ This trend both continues in and is challenged by the emerging literature on whiteness, which varies in its degree of attentiveness to class differences among whites (see Fine et al. 1997; Frankenberg 1997; Wray and Newitz 1997).

¹⁰ I suggest making these comparisons while also pointing to the need for a vigilant attentiveness to the risks involved in making claims of similarity and difference and to the politics of theory and dangers of appropriation. See Spelman 1988; Alarcón 1990; Bettie, in press (a).

¹¹ Writings by feminists of color have accentuated the daily subjective experience of class difference as it intersects with racial/ethnic difference (e.g., Hull, Scott, and Smith 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Smith 1983; Anzaldúa 1987; Asian Women United of California 1989; Anzaldúa 1990). Other anthologies that include writings by white working-class women help demonstrate the similarity and difference of working-class experience across race

It was with these theory debates and empirical gaps in mind that I set off to explore if and how young women understand class difference. I intended to foreground, while not privileging, class as I examined how gender, color, and ethnicity intersect with and shape class as a lived culture and a subjective identity. The context of the lives of these young women includes a deindustrializing economy, the growth of service-sector occupations held largely by women and men of color and by white women, the related family revolutions of the twentieth century, the elimination of affirmative action, a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, and changing cultural representations and iconographies of class, race, and gender meanings. These are social forces that render the term *working class* anachronistic even as many of these girls move toward low-wage, low-prestige jobs in their community. My goal was to explore the relationship between class symbolism and the formation of subjective class identity to understand “the complex and contradictory ways” (Long 1989, 428) in which class subjectivity is constructed in relationship to gender and racial/ethnic identity under late capitalism.

I examined girls’ experience of class difference and identity by documenting and analyzing the “commonsense” categories they used and created to describe and explain class-based differences among themselves. I documented the unspoken boundary work that was a part of everyday interaction among students—the kinds of interaction that reveal symbolic class distinctions and differences in “cultural capital” between working- and middle-class girls. Most important, I investigated the ways these commonsense class categories are infused with gender and racial/ethnic meanings.

Notes toward class as “performance” and “performative”

My study was done in a small town of approximately forty thousand people. The high school reflects the town demographically, being about 60 percent white and 40 percent Mexican-American, with other people of color composing less than 2 percent each of the population. Located in California’s central valley, the town was built on agriculture and the industries that support it. Approximately 16 percent of the Mexican-American students were Mexican-born, while the remainder were second and third

(Zandy 1990; Tokarczyk and Fay 1993; Mahony and Zmroczek 1997). Works that promote anti-essentialist understandings of race by working to deconstruct racial/ethnic “authenticity” by pointing to diversity within groups also help to foreground differences of class as well as gender, generation, and geography (e.g., Zavella 1989; hooks 1990, 1992, 1994; Hall 1992).

generation.¹² The majority of students at the school, both white and Mexican American, were from working-class families, but the children of middle-class professionals were a present minority. Most of the latter were white, but a handful were Mexican American. Working-class students ranged from “hard-living” to “settled-living” (Howell 1973) in experience. The former term describes lives that are chaotic and unpredictable, characterized by low-paying, unstable occupations, lack of health care benefits, and no home ownership. The latter describes lives that are orderly and predictable, characterized by relatively secure, higher-paying jobs, sometimes health benefits, and sometimes ownership of a modest home.¹³

I “hung out” with girls in classrooms and hallways, during lunch hours, at school dances, sports events, Future Homemakers of America meetings, at a Future Farmers of America hay-bucking contest and similar events, at MEChA meetings (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán; the Chicano student movement organization), in coffee shops, restaurants, the shopping mall, and the school parking lot, near the bleachers behind the school, at birthday parties, and sometimes sitting cross-legged on the floor of a girl’s bedroom, “just talkin.” I spent almost every day at the school during the school year, often returning in the evening to attend an extracurricular event and sometimes on weekends to meet and “kick it” with the girls. I came to know more than sixty girls well (approximately half were white and half Mexican American) and many more as acquaintances. I talked with them about such details of their lives as friendships, dating, partying, clothes, makeup, popular culture, school, family, work, and their hopes and expectations for the future.¹⁴

¹² The parents of the second-generation Mexican-American girls I came to know had immigrated as teens or young adults under the Bracero program (1942–64). They joined a stable working- and lower-middle-class Mexican-American community that had been established during an earlier wave of immigration (1920–30) and whose members had become small business owners, labor contractors, and field supervisors.

¹³ By *class* here I mean socioeconomic status: a combination of occupation, income, and educational attainment. Among hard-living working-class girls, one mother worked, e.g., as a night-shift grocery store stocker and one as a nurse’s aide; one father as a nonunion janitor and one as a self-employed truck driver. Among settled-living working-class girls, one mother worked as a beautician and one as a clerical worker; one father as a mechanic and one as a utility company serviceman. The parents of girls coded “middle class” were college educated and worked as teachers, counselors, administrators, lawyers, doctors, professors, business owners, etc.

¹⁴ I discuss the crisis of ethnographic authority, which has come from both feminists and “new ethnographers,” and the effect of my own white, settled-living cultural identity on my research at length elsewhere (Bettie, in press [b]). For more on this crisis, see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Stacey 1988; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen 1989; Kirby 1991; and Behar and Gordon 1995.

Over the course of the school year, I came to know the clique structure, or informal peer hierarchy, at the school, as it was the primary way students understood class and racial/ethnic differences among themselves. Labels and descriptions of each group varied, of course, depending on the social location of the student providing the description. Nonetheless, there was a general mapping that almost all students agreed on and provided easily when asked. Although there were exceptions, the groups were largely race/ethnic and class segregated. Among whites they included “preps” (middle class), “skaters/alternatives” (settled-living), “hicks” (settled- and hard-living), and “smokers/rockers/trash” (hard-living); among Mexican-American students there were “Mexican preps” (middle class and settled- and hard-living), “*las chicas*” (settled-living), and “*cholas/os*” or “hard cores” (hard-living).¹⁵

Group membership was linked to social roles, including curriculum choices (college prep or vocational track) and extracurricular activities (whether a student was involved in what are considered either college-prep or nonprep activities). These courses and activities combined to shape class futures leading some girls to four-year colleges, some to vocational programs at junior colleges, and some to low-wage jobs directly out of high school. While there is a strong correlation between a girl’s class of “origin” (by which I mean her parents’ socioeconomic status) and her class performance at school (which includes academic achievement, prep or nonprep activities, and membership in friendship groups and their corresponding style), it is an imperfect one, and there are exceptions in which middle-class girls perform working-class identity and vice versa. In other words, some students were engaged in class “passing” as they chose to perform class identities that were not their “own.”

Although clique membership was not entirely determined by class, there was certainly “a polarization of attitudes toward class characteristics,” and group categories (such as preps, smokers, *cholas*, etc.) were “embodiment[s] of the middle and working-class[es]” (Eckert 1989, 4–5). On the one hand, embracing and publicly performing a particular class culture mattered more than origins in terms of a student’s aspirations, her treatment by teachers and other students, and her class future.¹⁶ On the other

¹⁵ *Chola/o* describes a Mexican-American street style that sometimes marks identification with gangs, but it also can mark merely racial/ethnic belonging. Moreover, the degree of commitment to a gang exists on a continuum. Nonetheless, *cholas/os*, like *pachucas/os* before them, are often wrongly assumed to engage in criminal behavior (Vigil 1988).

¹⁶ For instance, working-class students who got on the college-prep track in high school did have more opportunity for mobility than their vocational-track counterparts. Rather than ignoring these exceptions, it is useful to explore the conditions of their exceptionalism. See, e.g., Patricia Gándara’s (1995) study of the educational mobility of low-income Chicanas/os.

hand, class origins did matter significantly, of course, as girls' life chances were shaped by the economic and cultural resources provided at home.¹⁷ Because of the imperfect correlation, I came to define students not only as working or middle class in origin but also as working- or middle-class *performers* (and, synonymously, as prep and nonprep students). Girls who were passing, or metaphorically cross-dressing, had to negotiate their "inherited" identity from home with their "chosen" public identity at school.¹⁸ There was a disparity for them between how their and their friends' families looked and talked at home and their own class performances at school. As I came to understand these negotiations of class as cultural (not political) identities, it became useful to conceptualize class as not only a material location but also a performance.

The work on performativity that has come out of cultural studies and poststructuralist feminism, with their radical constructionist analyses of gender, race, and sexuality, has much in common with the constructionism of symbolic interactionist sociology and, in particular, ethnomethodology. But little attention has been paid by either to thinking about *class* as a performance, as something that is accomplished, instead of, or not only, as a material location. To think about class as a performance is not to ignore its materiality. The materiality of class includes both economic and cultural resources about which we make meaning, and power lies in the naturalization and sanctioning of kinds of class subjects and class relations.¹⁹

¹⁷ Defining class "origin" is problematic in itself since the fluidity of economic and cultural capital within any given family often makes its "class" hard to name. Frequently, the class status of women, their husbands or partners, and their children differs. Given divorce and the coming and going of parents and stepparents (usually fathers and stepfathers) from children's lives, women's economic resources are often quite fluid (even in the lives of middle-class women). But women still are not likely to pair with men outside of their social class, so parents are usually not too disparate from one another in educational achievement. Moreover, women and men of color and white women often experience a disparity between educational attainment and economic reward. Thus, it is useful to think of economic and cultural capital as somewhat independent of each other.

¹⁸ While Mohanty 1992 uses the terms *inherited* and *chosen* to refer to cultural and political identities, respectively, I use both to describe *cultural* identities, not political ones. Inherited identity comes from one's family of origin, whereas chosen identity is shaped by cultural resources not inherited but desired and emulated.

¹⁹ I am building on work on performance theory by Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and on "doing difference" by West and Fenstermaker (1995). However, there are important differences between the two, which are reflected in a long-standing structure/agency debate. Post-structuralist uses of the concept of performance have been criticized for tending toward an overdetermined subject who is wholly interpellated by discourse and ethnomethodological ones for tending toward a subject too readily construed as an active agent outside the social structures that preexist and produce various performances. See "Symposium: On West and Fenstermaker's 'Doing Difference'" in *Gender and Society*, 9, no. 4 (1995). See also Bordo

The normalization and institutionalization of class inequality regulates class performances. For example, class-specific styles, such as standard or nonstandard grammar usage, accents, mannerisms, and dress (all of which are also specific to race/ethnicity and region), are learned sets of expressive cultural practices that express class membership. Group categories at school require different class performances, and students engage in practices of exclusion contingent on authentic class performances (Foley 1990). Cultural differences in class (linked to both education and income) are key to the middle-class practices of exclusion that make school “success” difficult for working-class students across color and ethnicity.²⁰ Class can be conceptualized as performative in that there is no *interior* difference (innate and inferior “intelligence” or “taste,” e.g.) that is being expressed; rather, institutionalized class inequality creates class subjects who *perform*, or display, differences in cultural capital.²¹

Consequently, I ask: What are the cultural gestures involved in the performance of class? How is class “authenticity” accomplished? And how is it imbued with racial/ethnic and gender meaning?²² Little attention has been paid to the ways class subjectivity, as a cultural identity, is experienced in relation to the cultural meanings of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.²³

1992 and Hood-Williams and Harrison 1998 for discussions of Butler’s work and phenomenological sociologies. Douglas Foley (1990) also explores class as a performance, drawing on the works of Irving Goffman and Jürgen Habermas, but he limits his analysis to the ways varying “speech performances” express class membership.

²⁰ Many have explored the utility of Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts to the study of race/ethnic and gender difference. In Bourdieu’s work, the relationship between cultural capital and class location is overdetermined: cultural capital too readily determines class location. Other axes of identity and social processes might account for exceptions. For instance, McCall 1992 considers the utility of Bourdieu’s work to feminist theory and the study of gender; Gándara 1995 suggests that, among upwardly mobile working-class Chicanas/os, family stories of exceptionalism and lost fortunes work as a kind of cultural capital to aid in mobility; MacLeod 1995 notes that the concept of “habitus,” which refers to systems of learned dispositions based on class, might also be applied to think through gender and racial/ethnic dispositions and demonstrates this difference in his study of black and white boys; and Holland and Eisenhart 1990 and Skeggs 1997 consider women’s sexual attractiveness as a form of capital.

²¹ Bourdieu suggests that while children from the working class can “acquire the social, linguistic, and cultural competencies which characterize the upper-middle and middle class, they can never achieve the natural familiarity of those born to these classes and are academically penalized on this basis” (Lamont and Lareau 1988, 156). This explains the discomfort and anxiety associated with “passing” often described by those who have been upwardly mobile.

²² Susan Bordo (1992) poses these same questions about race in her review of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*.

²³ For some examples of such explorations, however, see Allison 1994; Penelope 1994; Kadi 1996; Raffo 1997. Among British feminists, see Steedman 1986; Mahony and Zmroczek 1997; Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine 1997.

Dissident femininities

Because I spent my first few days at the school in a college-preparatory class (one that fulfills a requirement for admission to state universities), the first girls I met were college bound. Later I came to know these girls through the eyes of non-college-prep students as “the preps.” They were mostly white but included a handful of Mexican-American girls. Some of the white girls were also known as “the 90210s” after the television show *Beverly Hills 90210* about wealthy high schoolers in Beverly Hills. The preps related easily to what they saw as my “school project.” They eagerly volunteered to help me out and were ready and willing to talk at length about themselves and others. Displaying both social and academic skills, they were, in short, “teacher’s pets” (Luttrell 1993) or “the rich and populars” (Lesko 1988).

Looking for help connecting with non-college-prep girls, I visited the faculty room in the business department, which is primarily vocational, to recruit the aid of teachers and ask whose class I might visit. When I said that I wanted to talk to their girl students about their aspirations beyond high school, teachers shook their heads and laughed together in a knowing way, and one man joked, “they’ll all be barefoot and pregnant.” While the other teachers expressed discomfort with his way of making the point, they acknowledged that their students did not have high aspirations and often were “trouble.” They told me that one student, Yolanda, would be happy to give me “a piece of her mind,” and that “if she doesn’t like your survey she’ll tell you.” They shook their heads about another, Christina, who recently “told off her employer,” and they explained that it would be very difficult to interview any of these girls because they would fail to show up or I would be able to keep their attention only for a short time. Nonetheless, I was invited to attend their classes and attempt to recruit girls to talk with.

The first day I attended Ms. Parker’s business skills class was characteristic of my future visits to nonprep classes. On this particular day, there was a substitute teacher taking her place. These girls appeared different from the girls in the college-prep class: they wore more makeup, tight-fitting clothing, and seemed to have little interest in the classroom curriculum. In fact, the class was out of the teacher’s hands. The girls, mostly Mexican American, were happy to have me as a distraction, and one, whom I later came to know as Lorena, said loudly (Lorena was always loud), “Oh, we heard you might be coming. What do you want to know? I’ll tell you.” Completely ignoring the substitute, who had clearly given up on having any control over the class, they invited me to play cards. I hesitated: “What if Mr. D. (the vice principal) comes by?”

Lorena: Oh he never does, besides (flirtatiously) he *likes* me.

Becky: He doesn't like me. He's always callin' me into his office for something.

Lorena: He'll just ask me where's the other half of my shirt?

Lorena was referring to her short crop top, fashionable at the moment and against school dress codes because it reveals the midriff. Lorena went on, "That's Mr. H. He's our sub. Don't you think he's attractive? He's from the university too." She called him over to ask a question, and when he arrived, Lorena opened her book and pointed entirely randomly at a paragraph on the page and said coyly, "I don't understand *this*." He tried to respond appropriately by explaining the course material, but when it became clear to him that her question was not serious, he turned to me and politely asked about my study, saying, "What's your focus?" But Lorena interrupted, "You mean what's your *phone number*?" This brought rounds of laughter from the girls. It became obvious to the sub that Lorena was playing, and he wandered away a bit red in the face. She turned to me, "Did you check him out? You should go on a date with him." Near the end of the period, girls stopped their work early, if they were doing it at all, to pull out compacts, powder their faces, and check their lipstick and liner, reapplying when necessary. These elements of "girl culture" were notably missing from the college-prep classrooms I had visited.

Pipher's (1994) account of the "well-adjusted" girl, who exists before the alleged moment of poisoning or gender-subordinate indoctrination by mass culture, sounds suspiciously like a "prep," one of those girls who tended to be heavily involved in athletics or some other school-sanctioned extracurricular activity, who were high academic achievers, who usually wore looser, more unisex clothing and little or no makeup, and who were favored by teachers. Applauding girls with these characteristics, Pipher tells us that "androgynous adults are the most well adjusted . . . since they are free to act without worrying if their behavior is feminine or masculine" (18).

But the girls I came to know, both white and Mexican American, were not only worrying about whether their actions were masculine or feminine, they were equally concerned with the race/ethnic and, in a more convoluted way, the class meanings of their performances. Accounts of boys that suggest that the expressive cultural styles of youth subcultures often have their source in and reflect class and race/ethnic inequalities regardless of whether they are articulated as such apply to girls as well. I could not see Lorena and her friends, who called themselves "*las chicas*," as mere victims of a mass culture that promotes their subordination based on gender. One

thing white and Mexican-American working-class girls had in common, in spite of their many differences, was that they were, by their own naming, not “preps,” the primarily white middle-class college-preparatory girls they so despised. In centering gender, Pipher (1994) does not adequately explore the ways that girls’ practices, especially the ones that disturb her (such as heavy makeup, tattoos, piercing, drugs, school refusal), often mark hierarchical class and race/ethnic relations among girls themselves and are not solely the consequence of gender inequality. Girls do not define themselves only in relation to boys; “one can become a woman in relationship to other women” (Alarcón 1990).

The expression of self through one’s relationship to and creative use of commodities (both artifacts and the discourses of popular culture) is a central practice in capitalist society. The girls’ alternative versions of gender performance were shaped by a nascent knowledge of race and class hierarchies. They were very able to communicate a sense of unfairness, a “structure of feeling” (Williams 1965), where inequalities were felt but not politically articulated. Their struggles were often waged less over explicit political ideologies than over modes of identity expression. In short, among students there existed a symbolic economy of style that was the ground on which class and race relations were played out. A whole array of gender-specific commodities were used as markers of distinction among different groups of girls who performed race/ethnic- and class-specific versions of femininity. Hairstyles, clothes, shoes, and the colors of lip liner, lipstick, and nail polish were key markers used to express group membership as the body became a resource and a site on which difference was inscribed. For example, Lorena and her friends preferred darker colors for lips and nails, in comparison to the preps who either went without or wore clear lip gloss, pastel lip and nail color, or French manicures (the natural look). Each group knew the other’s stylistic preferences and was aware that their own style was in opposition. Girls created and maintained symbolic oppositions in which, as Penelope Eckert puts it, “elements of behavior that come to represent one category [are] rejected by the other, and . . . may be exploited by the other category through the development of a clearly opposed element” (1989, 50).

The importance of colors as a tool of distinction became evident when *las chicas* explained that the darker lip color they chose and the lighter colors the preps wore were not simply related to skin color. Lorena explained, “it’s not that, ’cause some Mexican girls who look kinda white, they wear real dark lip color” so that no one will mistake them as white. When I mentioned that I rarely saw white girls in dark lipstick, Lisa, a white prep, explained, scoffing and rolling her eyes, “oh there are some, but they’re

girls who are trying to be hard-core,” which meant they were white girls who were performing *chola* identity. She went on to say, “and those hick girls [white working class], some of them wear that bright pink crap on their lips and like *ba-loo* eye shadow!” Working-class performers across race were perceived similarly by preps as wearing too much makeup. The dissident femininity performed by both white and Mexican-American working-class girls were ethnic-specific styles, but, nonetheless, both sets of these girls rejected the school-sanctioned femininity performed by the preps. The association of light with prep girls and dark with nonprep girls may be arbitrary, but the association of pastels with “youth, innocence, and gaiety” and darker colors with “somberness, age, and sophistication” does coincide with middle- and working-class life stage trajectories (Eckert 1989, 50). Where middle-class performers experienced an extended adolescence by going to college, working-class performers across race began their adult lives earlier. And where middle-class performing girls (both white and Mexican American) chose academic performance and the praise of teachers and parents as signs of achieving adult status, nonprep girls wore different “badges of dignity” (Sennett and Cobb 1972; MacLeod 1995). For them, expressions of sexuality operated as a sign of adult status and served to reject teachers’ and parents’ methods of keeping them childlike.

It is too simple to treat the meaning of the expression of what appears as a sexualized version of femininity for working-class girls, and girls of color in particular, as a consequence of competitive heterosexuality and gender-subordinate learning. This fails to explain why girls made the choices they did from a variety of gender performances available to them. Rather, girls were negotiating meanings in a race- and class-stratified society, using commodities targeted at them as girls. They performed different versions of femininity that were integrally linked and inseparable from their class and race performances.

Las chicas, having “chosen” and/or been tracked into non-college-prep courses, were bored with their vocational schooling and often brought heterosexual romance and girl culture into the classroom as a favorite form of distraction, demonstrated in their repeated attempts to “set me up” with subs (which became almost a hazing ritual). But their gender performance and girl culture were not necessarily designed to culminate in a heterosexual relationship. Despite what appeared to be an obsession with heterosexual romance, a “men are dogs” theme was prevalent among them. Some said they didn’t want to marry until their thirties if at all, and they resented their boyfriends’ infidelities and attempts to police their sexuality by telling them what they should and should not wear. They knew that men should not be counted on to support them and any children they might have, and

they desired economic independence. Their girl culture was less about boys than about sharing rituals of traditional femininity as a kind of friendship bonding among girls. Although the overt concern in girl culture may be with boys and romance, girls often set themselves physically apart from boys (McRobbie 1991). Lorena made this clear one day:

Lorena: Well, when we go out, to the clubs or someplace. We all get a bunch of clothes and makeup and stuff and go to one person's house to get ready. We do each other's hair and makeup and try on each other's clothes. It takes a long time. It's more fun that way. [Thoughtfully, as if it just occurred to her,] sometimes, I think we have more fun getting ready to go out than we do going out. 'Cause when we go out we just *sit* there.

Julie Bettie: So then the clothes and makeup and all aren't for the men, or about getting their attention?

Lorena: Well, we like to see how many we can *meet*. But, well *you* know I don't fall for their lines. We talk to them, but when they start buggin' then we just go.

In short, *las chicas* had no more or less interest in heterosexual romance than did girls who performed prep or school-sanctioned femininity. Nonetheless, teachers and preps often confused the expression of class and race differences in style and activities among working-class girls as evidence of heterosexual interest. They often failed to perceive girls' class and race performances and unknowingly reproduced the commonsense belief that what is most important about girls, working-class performers in particular, is their girlness. *Las chicas'* style was not taken as a marker of race/ethnic and class distinction but was reduced to gender and sexuality. In a discussion with a teacher who sat on the gang task force, I asked why he thought students joined gangs. He assumed I meant boys and gave a lengthy, contradictory, and dubious explanation that included causal factors such as "family breakdown" and "cultural differences" and "oh, racial oppression too." When I asked specifically about girls in gangs, his response was, "Oh, well they are just trying to learn how to be young women," and his discussion about them centered on teen pregnancy. Like most school personnel with whom I talked about girls in gangs, he saw them primarily as gendered, and the salience of their race/ethnic and class identities was left without comment.

The primacy of gender as the defining characteristic of girls obscured the ways class and race/ethnic identities informed girls' actions. For example, "girl fights" were frequent at the school, occurring at least as often

as fights among boys. When I asked what girls fought about, both school officials and the girls themselves always answered, “boys.” But when I asked girls to tell me about specific fights they were in, it turned out that race/ethnic and class identities were often center stage in their accounts, as when Mariana described a hallway confrontation between girls after a classroom discussion on affirmative action. Nonetheless, heterosexual relations remained the most common and readily available way to describe “girl fights.”

In spite of the meanings that working-class girls themselves gave to their gender-specific cultural markers, their performances were always overdetermined by broader cultural meanings that code women in heavy makeup and tight clothes as oversexed—in short, cheap. In other words, class differences are often understood as sexual differences, where “the working class is cast as the bearer of an exaggerated sexuality, against which middle-class respectability is defined” (Ortner 1991, 177). Among women, “clothing and cosmetic differences are taken to be indexes of the differences in sexual morals” between classes (178). Indeed, this is what I observed: middle-class performing prep girls (both white and Mexican American) perceived *las chicas*, as well as working-class performing white girls, as overly sexually active.

But Mexican-American nonprep girls were perceived as even more sexually active than their white counterparts because, although there was no evidence that they were more sexually active, they were more likely to keep their babies if they became pregnant, so there was more often a visible indicator of their sexual activity. And while school personnel at times explained working-class Mexican-American girls’ gender performances as a consequence of “their” culture—an assumed real ethnic cultural difference in which women are expected to fulfill traditional roles and/or are victims of machismo and a patriarchal culture—the girls’ generational status (according to two meanings) was not taken into account. On the one hand, *las chicas* were a generation of girls located in a historical context of dual-wage families, and they did not describe parents who had traditional roles in mind for their daughters. Moreover, they were second-generation Mexican-Americans, young women with no intention of submitting to traditional gender ideologies.

Class was thus a present social force in the versions of femininity that the girls performed, but it was unarticulated and rendered invisible because it was interpreted (by school personnel, by preps, and at times by working-class girls themselves) as primarily about gender and a difference of sexual morality between good girls and bad girls. Likewise, class is rendered invisible in feminist theory when girls’ poor school performance is seen

primarily as a consequence of the fact that as girls they are “educated in romance” (Holland and Eisenhart 1990), rather than as a consequence of race and class tracking.

“Acting white”

The logic of leftist social theory routinely reduced race and gender to class (presumed more fundamental), failing to see race and gender as autonomous fields of social conflict or axes of social organization. However, in popular discourse, where “class is not a central category of cultural discourse” (Ortner 1991, 169), the situation routinely is just the opposite: class is not present at all as a category of thought or is considered temporary (e.g., a condition of immigration) and not institutionalized, such that categories such as race and gender that appear to be essentially there, fixed, and natural readily take the place of class in causal reasoning instead of being understood as intertwined with one another (as seen when class difference is read as sexual morality). In other words, class does appear in popular discourse — “just not in terms we recognize as ‘about class’” (Ortner 1991, 170). In short, class is often read through gender and through race; thus, class meaning is articulated in other terms.

Many of the Mexican-American students did have a way to both recognize and displace class simultaneously, at times explaining differences among themselves solely in racial/ethnic terms, such as “acting white” versus acting “the Mexican role.” The class coding of these descriptions is revealed when they are pushed only slightly. When I asked Lorena what she meant by “acting white,” she gave an animated imitation of a white girl she had met at a Future Business Leaders of America meeting, affecting a stereotypical “valley girl” demeanor and speech pattern: “Ohmigod, like I can’t believe I left my cell phone in my car. It was so nice to meet you girls, do keep in touch.” Lorena perceived this sentiment as quite disingenuous, since they had just met. Part of working-class girls’ interpretation of preps was that they were “fake” and their friendships phony and insincere, always in the interest of social ambition. Lorena went on, “I’m going to play volleyball for Harvard next year.” Clearly, “Harvard” was an exaggeration on Lorena’s part. But to Lorena any university may as well have been Harvard as it was just as distant a possibility. Erica, a Filipina-American girl who had befriended and been accepted as one of *las chicas*, confided to me, “There’s a lot of trashing of white girls really, and Mexican girls who act white.” When I asked her what she meant by “acting white,” her answer was straightforward: “The preps.” “Not the smokers or the hicks?” I asked. “Oh no, never smokers, basically preps.”

At some level, the girls knew that they didn't mean white generally but preps specifically (that is, a particular middle-class version of white), but "class" as a way of making distinctions among whites was not easily articulated.²⁴ The whites most visible to them were those who inflicted the most class injuries, the preps. In fact, working-class whites were often invisible in their talk, unless I asked specifically about them. The most marginalized ones, known as the "smokers," were either unknown to the Mexican-American students or perplexing. As Mariana, a Mexican-American middle-class performer said, almost exasperated, "I mean they're white. They've had the opportunity. What's wrong with them?" Students found it useful or necessary to describe class performances in racial terms such as "acting white" because of the difficulty of coming up with a more apt way to describe class differences in a society in which class discourse as such is absent and because the correlation of race and class (the overrepresentation of people of color among the poor) was a highly visible reality to Mexican-American students.

At times, race/ethnicity was understood and explained by students in performance terms, as when whites were said to "act Mexican" and Mexicans to "act white." The girls were able to delineate the contents of those categories and the characteristics of the performances that were class coded. However, one's race performance was also expected to correspond to a perceived racial "essence" marked by color and surname. Understandings of race as a performance and as an essence existed simultaneously. Consequently, middle- or working-class performances were perceived and read differently depending on the race/ethnicity of the performer and the reader, since class performances have race-specific meanings linked to notions of "authentic" racial/ethnic identity, where white is high or middle and brown is low. As one Mexican-American girl said, "the *cholos* play the Mexican role."

The notion of racial/ethnic "authenticity" is a discursive resource mobilized to perform the work of constructing racial/ethnic boundaries, boundaries that are inevitably class coded. In short, race and class are always already mutually implicated and read in relation to one another. But couching class within race and ethnicity, and vice versa, impairs our understanding of both social forces. Not only do we fail to learn something about class as a shaper of identity because of the conflation, but, further,

²⁴ Fordham and Ogbu 1986 and Fordham 1996 address the meanings of the phrase "acting white" among black students. The content of "acting white" in their subjects' accounts is often (but not always) coded middle class (e.g., attending the Smithsonian and the symphony or doing volunteer work).

we fail to learn much about the existence of racial/ethnic cultural forms and experience *across* class categories.

As I have said, there are exceptions to the class origin equals class performance rule. When students performed class identities that did not correspond with those of their families of origin, they had to negotiate between their inherited identity from home and their chosen public identity at school. For Mexican-American girls, this meant a complicated struggle with the meanings of and links between class mobility and assimilation, and with a racial politics or identification, where income, what kind of work parents did (such as agricultural work or warehouse work), generation of immigration, skin color, and Spanish fluency were key signifiers that then became the weapons of identity politics, used to make claims to authenticity and accusations of inauthenticity.

Middle-class *cholas*

A handful of the girls were third-generation Mexican Americans from professional middle-class families. They had struggled to find their place in this race-class system. They had grown up in white neighborhoods and gone to elementary school with primarily white kids, where, as Rosa explained, “I knew I was different, because I was brown.” In junior high, which was less segregated, some of them became *cholas* and were “jumped in” to a gang. When I asked why, Ana explained that she hated her family:

Ana: My mom wanted this picture-perfect family, you know. And I just hated it.

Julie: What do you mean by a perfect family?

Ana: You know, we had dinner at night together, and everything was just, okay. She was so *happy*. And I hated that. My life was sad, my friends’ lives were sad.

Julie: Why were they sad?

Ana: One friend’s mom was on welfare, the other didn’t know who her dad was. Everything was wrong in their families.

As she described class differences between herself and her friends, she struggled for the right words to describe it. And as Lorena sought to describe the difference between herself and her friend Ana, she too searched for words: “Well, in junior high she was way down kinda low, she got in with the bad crowd. But in high school she is higher up kinda. I mean not as high as Patricia is (another middle-class performer) but she’s not as low as she used to be.” Lorena’s perception of Ana as high but low was shaped

by Ana's crossover style and the sense that she had "earned" her "low" status by performing *chola* identity and gang-banging. In Ana's attempt to understand her place in a social order where color and poverty correlate more often than not, the salience of color was integral to her identity formation. She felt compelled to perform working-class identity at school as a marker of racial/ethnic belonging. As she explained, "the Mexican Mexicans, they aren't worried about whether they're Mexican or not."

Although Ana, Rosa, and Patricia eventually had accepted the cultural capital their parents had to give them and were now college prep and headed to four-year colleges, they were friendly with *las chicas* and still dressed and performed the kind of race-class femininity that *las chicas* did. In this way, they distanced themselves from preps and countered potential accusations of "acting white." In short, their style confounded the race-class equation and was an intentional strategy. By design, they had middle-class aspirations without assimilation to prep, which for them meant white, style. It went beyond image to a set of race politics as they tried to recruit *las chicas* to be a part of MEChA. In fact, when I went along on a bus ride to tour a nearby business school with *las chicas*, I was surprised to find that Ana, Rosa, and Patricia came along. I asked why they had come along since they had already been accepted to four-year schools. Rosa responded, "Because we're with the girls, you know, we have to be supportive, do these things together."

Mexican-American girls' friendships crossed class performance boundaries more often than white girls' did because of a sense of racial alliance that drew them together in relation to white students at school and because the Mexican-American community brought them together in activities outside school. They were also far more pained about divisions among themselves than white girls ever were (an aspect of whiteness that can seem invisible). They felt the need to present a united front, and this was particularly acute among girls who were politicized about their racial/ethnic identity and participated in MEChA. For white girls, competition among them did not threaten them as a racial/ethnic minority community.

In spite of their cross-class friendships, class differences were still salient among Mexican-American girls, as evidenced in Lorena's description of Ana and in working-class performers' descriptions of MEChA, if they knew what it was at all, as "for brainy types," since MEChA was understood as a college-prep activity. Some of *las chicas* did join MEChA, but they typically played inactive roles. When I asked Yolanda about it, she replied, "Well, we joined, but it's not the same for me as it is for Patricia 'cause her mom is educated and all. She's real enthusiastic about it. You know, she's

going to go to college and will do it there. But like Lorena and me, we can't always make it to the meetings. They're at lunch time and I have to go to work then, or I want to at least get some lunch before I go to work." Yolanda and Lorena both had vocational, work-experience "classes" for the last two periods of school, which allowed them to receive school credit for working. Patricia expressed some frustration with *las chicas'* failure to be very involved, as she and the other college-prep MEChA members struggled to find ways to reach *la raza* and get the people to come to the functions they organized.

The politicized racial identity offered by MEChA allowed Ana, Rosa, Patricia, and their friends to be middle-class performers and not deracinate.²⁵ Ironically, although it embraced a working-class, community-based agenda, MEChA served middle-class performers who were already tracked upward more than it did a working-class base. It appealed less to working-class performers whose racial/ethnic identity was more secure, who were less vulnerable to accusations of acting white, and who understood it as a college-prep activity (it comes from the university, promotes schooling, and is therefore intimidating to working-class performers who experience class injury in relation to it). Class performance stood in the way of the racial alliance that MEChA students desired. Class differences were salient among Mexican-American students, but they were not often articulated as such.

White trash chola

Not surprisingly, white students generally did not explain class differences among themselves in racial terms. Rather, class difference was articulated as individual difference (she's "popular" or she's a "loser") and as differences in group membership and corresponding style (hicks, smokers, preps, etc.). But class meaning was at times bound to racial signifiers in the

²⁵ Because becoming middle class requires doing well in school, and because doing well means learning English and a colonialist history and suppressing one's own culture, the curriculum makes it difficult to be both middle class and Mexican American, since schools do not readily structure such a bicultural identity. See Antonia Darder's (1991) critique of traditional pedagogy, her discussion of the variety of student responses to the biculturalization process, and her elaboration of an alternative critical bicultural pedagogy. See also Angela Valenzuela's (1997) account of Mexican-American students' "subtractive schooling experience," whereby schools subtract cultural identifications from students rather than adding to them and thus fail to promote bicultural identity as an option. Valenzuela also keenly addresses generation and style among Mexican-American youth and its common misinterpretation by teachers and, at times, parents. MEChA helps structure bicultural identity to some degree by making it possible for middle-class performers to do well in school and yet maintain a racial/ethnic identity (though it is perhaps a political racial/ethnic identity more than a cultural one).

logic of white students, as it was among Mexican-American students. This was apparent in the way the most marginalized white working-class students, who were at times described by other white students as “white trash,” worked hard interactionally to clarify that they were not Mexican.²⁶ In our very first conversation, Tara explained, without any solicitation, “I’m kinda dark, but I’m not Mexican.” In our conversation about her boyfriend’s middle-class parents, she explained that his mom had “accused me of being Mexican.” She explained to me that she was Italian-American, and her color and features did match this self-description (although it is also possible that there may be family secrets she does not know). Her father, a poor man, had worked in the fields for a time and drove what she called “a tex-mex truck,” which was “one of those old beaters like the Mexicans in the fields drive.” I couldn’t help but think that her defensiveness about her racial status was linked to her class location and, further, that her class location assisted her boyfriend’s mother’s assessment of Tara as much as her coloring did. In short, Tara seemed to experience herself as “too close for comfort,” so to speak, and she took every opportunity to make it clear that she was not Mexican.

Similarly, Starr, a white girl who grew up in a Mexican-American neighborhood and went to the largely Mexican-American elementary school in town, also had the sense that some whites, those at the bottom of the heap like herself, were almost brown. We were talking in the lunchroom one day about girls and fights when she told me this story:

Starr: Well the worst one was back in junior high. All of my friends were Mexican, ’cause I went to Landon. So I was too.

Julie: You were what?

Starr: Mexican. Well I acted like it, and they thought I was. I wore my hair up high in front you know. And I had an accent. Was in a gang. I banged [gang-banged] red [gang color affiliation].

Julie: Were you the only white girl?

Starr: Yeah.

Julie: What happened? Why aren’t you friends with them now?

Starr: We got into a fight. I was in the bowling alley one day with my boyfriend. They came in and called him a piece of white trash. That made me mad and I smacked her. Lucky for her someone called the cops. They came pretty fast.

Julie: What did she mean by white trash?

Starr: Welfare people. He was a rocker. Had long hair, smoked.

²⁶ See Bettie 1995 and Wray and Newitz 1997 for explorations of the race and class meanings of the designation “poor white trash.”

This episode ended her *chola* performance, and she was part of the white smoker crowd when I met her. Like most other girls, Starr had told me that girls fight primarily about “guys.” But her actual story reveals something different. A boy was central to the story, but the girls were not fighting *over* him. Rather, Starr’s *chola* friends were bothered by her association with him, which pointed to her violation of the race-class identity she had been performing as a *chola*. Her friends forced her to make a choice.

Starr’s race-class performance was a consequence of the neighborhood in which she grew up, and, like Tara, she had absorbed the commonsense notions that white is middle, that brown is low, and, most interesting, that low may become brown in certain contexts. Not unlike the experience of middle-class *cholitas* for whom being middle-class Mexican-American felt too close to being white, Starr’s working-class version of whiteness felt too close to being Mexican-American in this geographic context. Girls reported that cross-race friendships were more common in grade school, but in junior high a clear sorting out along racial lines emerged (and along class lines too, although with less awareness). Starr’s story is about junior-high girls working to sort out class and color and ethnicity, about the social policing of racial boundaries, and about her move from a brown to a white racial performance (where both remained working class). Not insignificantly, her white performance included a racist discourse by which she distanced herself from Mexican-Americans via derogatory statements about them.

Understanding Starr’s *chola* performance as a cultural appropriation would be overly simplistic. This is what is implied by the discourse on “wiggas,” whereby white (and, by some accounts, middle-class) youth appropriate what is marketed in popular culture as black style. Blackness is currently ubiquitous in pop culture, present more than it ever has been historically, and it has become synonymous with hip-hop (Gray 1995). Indeed, in spite of the near absence of black students at this school, “blackness” was ever present in their youth culture. Importantly, Mexican-American signifiers do not carry the same currency in an economy of “cool” that “black” (read hip-hop) ones do, at least not among white students. Starr says that she did not understand her *chola* performance as a choice, an attempt to be cool. Social geography and the ways self is shaped by the degree of class and race homogeneity or diversity in one’s community seem salient to Starr’s identity options: “I didn’t really think about it. Those were just who my friends were. Who I grew up with. There wasn’t really anyone else around.”

(Mis)uses of "class": A caution

Class difference was salient, although not articulated as such, *within* these racial/ethnic groups. But in relationships *across* racial/ethnic groups, race often "trumps" class. One way racial/ethnic alliances across class were manifested was in attitudes toward California's Proposition 209 (misleadingly called the California Civil Rights Initiative), passed in 1996, which eliminated state affirmative-action programs, including admissions policies for the state's university systems. To the pleasure of white conservatives, University of California regent Ward Connerly, a black man, became the leading spokesperson and argued for income instead of race as a fairer admission criterion. In this conservative community, all of the white students I spoke to, without exception, supported Proposition 209. Both working- and middle-class white students were easily swayed by the "class instead of race" logic, which both groups interpreted as white instead of brown, where "class" stands in for white, and "race" stands in for brown (and black).

Working-class performers were less concerned with college admission than with job competition, since the decisive moment of whether a student is going on to college had occurred two to three years earlier, when they began the vocational track. Consequently, by their senior year they lacked the coursework for admission to state universities. Although white working-class students experienced a feeling of unfairness in relation to preps regarding educational achievement and college, they lacked a discourse of class that could explain their own and their parents' "failure" and that would allow them to articulate the class antagonism they felt toward middle-class students. In its absence, a discourse of individualism and meritocracy helped render institutionalized class inequality invisible and consequently left white working-class students feeling like individually flawed "losers." And while Proposition 209 pointed to class inequality and provided the potential for white working-class students to name class as a disadvantage they could identify with, this possibility was often derailed by the fact of a readily available racist discourse on "reverse discrimination," which scapegoats people of color for white working-class pain, and in the end Proposition 209 added fuel to that fire. The fact that Mexican Americans were overrepresented among the poor was usually not apparent to white working-class students, and when it was made apparent, they perceived it as natural and normal because they had the psychological wage of whiteness and conflated being American with being white (Du Bois 1935; Roediger 1991). Unfortunately, working-class students were less likely to see themselves as victims of class inequality than as victims of "reverse discrimination."

Somewhat curiously, white middle-class students were also swayed by

the color-blind class logic of Proposition 209. Preps' sense of racial competition regarded who was and who was not getting into which college. The students of color most visible to them were the handful who sat next to them in college-prep classes. Preps' own class privilege was unapparent to them, so much so that the mass of working-class whites and working-class Mexican Americans were so "othered" as to be invisible. The only Mexican-American students whom preps could imagine going to college seemed to be very much like them in that they were middle-class performers. At times, these college-prep Mexican-American students were resented as "box checkers" who were perceived to be unfairly benefiting from their "minority" status, as middle-class white students constructed themselves as victims of reverse discrimination. These college-prep Mexican-American students were highly visible, to the disadvantage of their vocational-track peers. Since the large body of working-class vocational students were not in the running for college admission anyway, among college-prep students discussing college admissions, *class* was taken as a code for *white*.

And perhaps rightly so. Class inequality is not adequately addressed by eliminating race as an admission criterion since the vast majority of working-class students of all colors had been tracked out two to three years earlier. When liberal education policy attempts to deal with social inequality by trying to get everyone into college, it fails to address the fundamental fact that the global economy needs uneducated, unskilled workers, and workers need living wages. White students supported Proposition 209 not so much because they really understood institutionalized class inequality as because they were aware that race was being eliminated as a criterion, which benefited them regardless. Ironically, because it offered class instead of race, not in addition to race, the discourse surrounding Proposition 209 encouraged students to understand inequality *solely* in racial terms and in the end worked as a racial project creating an alliance among whites across class and among Mexican Americans across class. Because any clear understanding of institutionalized class inequality is missing from U.S. popular and political discourse, "class" was read as racial code and used to rearticulate white privilege.²⁷

Although class difference was salient within racial/ethnic groups, played out on the terrain of style and manifested as different gender performances,

²⁷ Moreover, if we look solely at college-preparatory students seeking admission to state universities, a shift in focus toward class differences among those students fails to address the need for racial/ethnic diversity in higher education outside of class difference. Further, it fails to face the fact that SAT scores and college completion rates among black and Latino students across all economic categories remain lower than those of whites. See Takagi 1992 for a detailed account of the shift from race to class as a criterion for college admissions.

the salience of class difference was at times forgone for racial alliances both among white and Mexican-American students. Race and class political positions are situational and relationally defined such that race and class alliances are potentially always shifting. But the possibility of a class alliance across race seems eternally defeated both by the absence of a fully articulated political discourse on class and by the presence of a racist discourse that naturalizes racial/ethnic inequality and blames people of color for white working-class pain and for white middle-class fears of downward mobility.

Conclusion

“Class” is largely missing as a category of identity offered by popular culture and political discourse in the late twentieth-century United States. Working-class subjects are present among the imagery of popular culture, but they are not often articulated as “working class.” Likewise, in political discourse a “working-class” constituency goes unrecognized as class difference is downplayed and Americans are constructed as all a part of a great “middle.” Moreover, a liberal version of multicultural education too often provides attention to race/ethnic and gender inequalities only as a consequence of “discrimination,” failing to explore both as linked to institutionalized class inequality. In short, class subjectivity is not discursively present even though the social force of class continues, of course, to shape political and cultural life.

Recognizing that identity and experience are always discursively mediated, I take girls’ commonsense understandings of self-identity and experience (in particular, the presence/absence of class as an articulated identity) less as truths than as windows into “the complicated working of ideology,” the webs of power and meaning that make such experiences and subjectivities possible (Fuss 1989, 118). Experience is mediated by the frameworks for understanding ourselves that are made available to us. When we look to the multiple discursive sites (popular culture, politics, social science, schooling) and ways in which women are and are not constructed as, and do and do not experience themselves as, class subjects, we can see that there are “classifying projects” (Skeggs 1997) at work, but they are rarely named as such. Class remains obscure and often absent from the repertoire of possible cultural and political subjectivities.

The class futures of the girls I came to know are secured by the historical context in which they live, where race and gender projects in unison with a deindustrializing U.S. economy offer them only low-wage service-sector jobs, largely without labor union protection, and where a middle-income, blue-collar “family wage” job after high school is still not an

option for women, no longer a real possibility for men, and still less likely for workers of color than white workers. Moreover, the shift from industrial to service work, where the latter is often coded feminine and middle class, poses a challenge to the (re)creation of a U.S. working-class identity and to the anachronistic language of class itself. It is ironic that, even under these conditions, class remains invisible in public discourse and, too often, in critical social theory.²⁸ But these changes give good cause to renew an interest in “class” and imagine antireductionist ways of retheorizing class as we work to understand the ways in which class subjectivity might be constructed in relation to gender and racial/ethnic identity in late twentieth-century global capitalism.

I have tried to model one way of thinking about class in relation to other axes of identity by exploring what utility might come of thinking through class as a performance and as performative and by exploring how the various gestures of class performance and performativity never exist outside of race and gender meanings. In the end, inequality along multiple axes was reproduced at the school, but the invisibility of class was also reproduced, in that race and gender often took its place in girls’ own understandings and “the school’s” perception of who they were. This is not to say that race and gender were understood accurately while class was left obscure. In fact, it was the essentialized conceptualizations of race and gender that helped to keep the difference of class invisible. Race and gender were more readily perceived as natural and inevitable causal social forces, while class was left unnamed altogether, invisible as a category of belonging or causality.

It was left unnamed because of the lack of a fully articulated political or cultural discourse on class as such. The difference that economic and cultural resources make did structure girls’ lives, but class meaning was routinely articulated through other categories of difference. Understanding group differences as differences of “style” was a way of simultaneously displacing and recognizing class difference. Accusations of “acting white” obscured class at the same time that they provided a way of talking about class difference between white middle-class preps and working-class Mexican Americans, as well as among Mexican-American students themselves. Likewise, the distinction between “good girls” and “bad girls” was wrongly perceived as about sexual morality, yet at the same time school-sanctioned femininity and dissident femininity were read as symbolic markers of class and race difference.

²⁸ There is a growing literature on rethinking class that demonstrates various investments in class as a conceptual tool (see McNall, Levine, and Fantasia 1991; Dimock and Gilmore 1994; Hall 1997).

Thinking through class as a performance enables us to acknowledge exceptions to the rule that class origin equals class future and to understand that economic and cultural resources often, but not inevitably, determine class futures. It allows us to explore the experience of negotiating inherited and chosen identities, as, for example, when middle-class students of color felt compelled to perform working-class identities as a marker of racial/ethnic belonging. It helps demonstrate, too, how other axes of identity intersect with and inform class identity and consequently shape class futures. Thinking through class as a performance is useful for understanding exceptions, those who are consciously “passing” (whether it be up or down).

But it is also useful to think of class as performative in the sense that class as cultural identity is an *effect* of social structure.²⁹ Social actors largely perform the cultural capital that is a consequence of the material and cultural resources to which they have had access. Cultural performances most often reflect one’s habitus or unconscious learned dispositions, which are not natural or inherent or prior to the social organization of class inequality but are in fact produced by it. Considering class as performative is consistent with regarding it more as a cultural than a political identity and more as a “sense of place” than as class consciousness in a political, marxist sense. It helps explain why class struggle is often waged more over modes of identity expression than over explicit political ideologies.

In anti-essentialist fashion, class as a cultural identity cannot be uncoupled from one’s gendered and racialized self or from how these categories are historically reconstructed and changing. Highlighting this points to how and why other axes of identity might inform and motivate political action more than class. In short, directing our attention to class culture and identity (rather than to class as a political consciousness or to class-for-itself) “is a way of focusing class analysis on the *cultural politics* of how economic classes are culturally reproduced and resisted” (Foley 1990; emphasis added). It is not the case that race and gender are mere ideologies that mask the reproduction of class inequality; they are organizing principles in their own right, processes that are co-created with class. In our

²⁹ John Hood-Williams and Wendy Harrison (1998), in their critical review of Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, point to a useful distinction between performance and performativity. *Performance* refers to a conscious attempt at passing. Applied to class, this might mean consciously imitating middle-class expressions of cultural capital in an attempt at upward mobility. *Performativity*, though, refers to subjectivity as an effect of social structure and the organization of inequality that produces various kinds of subjects. Here there is no “doer behind the deed.” With respect to class, it would describe displays of cultural capital that are consequences of class location or habitus.

attempts to explore the ways these processes are and are not parallel, contemporary feminist and cultural studies theorists often suggest the need to think of these multiple social formations *evenly*. But we might consider that social actors do not experience them this way and explore the meanings people actually give to these categories, in ways that render class invisible.

Sociology Department
University of California, Santa Cruz

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