

Portraying Waretown High

As a new school year was about to begin, I spent many hours on the phone, chatting with high school teachers in California's Central Valley about my research interest. I was trying to find an advocate who would help me gain entrance into a school to conduct a comparative study of girls from different class and racial/ethnic locations.¹ When I explained my interests, many of the teachers (all women) suggested I read Mary Pipher's 1994 bestseller *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, popular among school teachers and parents. One even exclaimed, "Oh, you absolutely *have* to read this book if you are going to study girls." But I was too consumed with arranging access to a site and, once I made my way into a school, with getting to know several groups of girls to spend much time reading.

It was not until several months later that I picked up Pipher's book. By this time, I had come to know approximately sixty senior girls in multiple class- and race-organized cliques at the school I call Waretown High. Reading *Reviving Ophelia*, I found that some of the stories Pipher tells in her examination of that crucial transition between girlhood and adolescence resonated with Waretown girls' accounts of the trials they had suffered in junior high and early high school.² Yet I felt uncomfortable with her summation of the influences on girls' lives.

THE LIMITATIONS OF GENDER

Pipher's title refers to the story of Ophelia, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which "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). Pipher laments over girls who only a year before ran and played sports, unconcerned about their appearance; girls who on reaching puberty became obsessed with body image and whose self-esteem plummeted as they were indoctrinated in the "junk values of mass culture." She tells stories of low self-esteem, eating disorders, difficulties with friendship, use and abuse of drugs and alcohol, sexual assault, suicide attempts, and at times, confusion over racial/ethnic belonging. Pipher asks why drugs and alcohol are so common among seventh-graders, why girls hate their parents, and what the meaning of body piercing may be. Other problems she lists as "less dangerous" but "more puzzling" are "school refusal" and "underachievement." Although I could not disagree with her finding that we live in "a girl-poisoning culture," I was disturbed by the way she framed the stories of girls she had counseled.

The week before, I had talked with a white girl named Tara, whom I found in the lunchroom, skipping class. A far cry from the blue-eyed, innocently vulnerable-looking adolescent girl on the cover of *Reviving Ophelia*, Tara had her purple-dyed hair tucked up messily in a rubber band, her short fingernails were painted black, and she wore two charcoal smudges of eye shadow, in a rather outdated-punk statement of nihilism. As she explained, "I wear black, 'cause it describes my mood." On top of her head sat her trademark sunglasses, which she usually hid behind in school but had lifted for our conversation. She wore torn-up cut-off jeans, combat boots (pseudo-brand Doc Martens), and an oversized tan polyester leisure-suit jacket she'd "scored" at the thrift store. Tara was regularly "tweaked" on crank; she was currently grounded for getting "an F+ and improving" on her report card (as she said with a proud chuckle); and she had told me that as a sophomore she "was throwing up all the time" (bulimic behavior). Now she was explaining that her last boyfriend, John, "taught me how to drink high class . . . you know, drinking wine with food or something." This comment came on the heels of telling me about a fight she had had with a onetime friend

named Jill: "I was pounding her head against the cement when the crowd broke it up." Jill's mother had recently married, and the stepfather's income had made a vacation to Hawaii possible. Tara was invited along, but her parents could not afford to pay for her trip, so Jill had taken another friend. After the trip, Tara reported, Jill "had all these new clothes. And she, I don't know, just changed. She stopped smokin' and started callin' us losers and lowlifes all the time." Tara, who expected she might have to return for a fifth year of high school in order to graduate, had made no plans beyond high school.

I had also spoken that week with Lorena, a Mexican-American girl I'd known for several months. As we sat at the concrete lunch tables in the courtyard, she played with her hair, running her fingers through it, tucking it up into a white scrunchy, only to pull it out again a minute later, tossing her head to direct the hair back over her shoulders out of the way. Her eyelashes were thick with mascara, her long nails were a deep burgundy color, and her lips were painted to match and carefully outlined with a darker shade. She wore white platform shoes, hip-hugger bell bottom jeans, and a tight cropped knit top, all in tune with the recent Seventies retro fashion trend. We had just come from a sewing class composed of white and Mexican-American girls, discussing, as one white girl put it, how "ridiculously dressed up some girls get just to go to the mall." She had carried on about how she preferred to dress very casually for shopping, in her most comfortable old jeans and a sweat-shirt. Many in the group concurred, but I noted Lorena's silence. When I asked her about it, her answer pointed to the salience of being brown and the meanings associated with it: "I always dress up for the mall. Otherwise they think I'm shoplifting." A group of white girls walked past us, and Lorena began explaining to me why she "can't stand those rich girls." Using her best "valley girl" accent, she mimicked them saying, "Ohmigod, like I can't believe I left my cell phone in my car." Lorena had missed school three days that week because her father had hurt his back lifting a heavy carton on the loading dock at work. Her mother could not afford to miss work; neither could her older brother, who still lived at home and contributed to the family income with money he made working at the car wash. Consequently, Lorena was the only one able to stay home and care for her dad while he was down.

As she told me this, we walked past a wall display of poetry by students in an English literature class, one of which read: "College should reflect the dedication of the few, / for they all started in the same classroom, / and were given the same work to do." In casual conversation

with her peers Lorena spoke of plans to attend the university and an interest in law. In reality, she had not taken the required courses for university admission; she hoped to go to a nearby community college after graduation but wasn't sure her parents could afford it.³

Tara and Lorena were each members of friendship groups I came to know well, and these two groups of girls, along with many other groups, were on my mind as I read Pipher's description of girls' lives. During the months I had spent at Waretown High I had not come to see Tara and Lorena as mere victims of a mass culture that promotes their subordination based on gender. To do so would have been to define them solely by their gender and even within that to see them solely as victims. One thing Tara and Lorena had in common, in spite of their many differences, was that by their own naming they were not "preps," the predominantly white middle-class college-preparatory girls they so despised. As I read *Reviving Ophelia*, it struck me that Pipher's account of the "well-adjusted" girl, who exists before the alleged moment of poisoning or gender-subordinate indoctrination by mass culture, sounded suspiciously like a "prep," one of those girls at the high school 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. In short, they were girls who performed a school-sanctioned version of femininity. 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 worried about whether their actions were masculine or feminine; they were equally concerned with the race and, in a more convoluted way, the class meanings of their practices, or "performances," which, if they mimicked preps, would set them up in a competition where they could only fail. Less (or not only) victims of mass culture than creative users of it, girls who did not meet prep norms created alternative symbolic economies in which they earned and wore different "badges of dignity" (Sennett and Cobb 1972; MacLeod 1987). Their alternative versions of gender performance were shaped by a nascent knowledge of racial/ethnic and class hierarchies.

I confess—somewhat apologetically—that I am presenting Pipher as a straw person of sorts. (Admittedly, my knee jerked each time her tone suggested a girl in lipstick was in need of counseling.) But the fact that

her book spent 154 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, ending in August 1998, justifies a close consideration of it. What I recognized as I read the book and thought about girls like Tara and Lorena was that Pipher's account of girls is too often void of the broader social context in which they live. Yet it is not surprising that such a book would find much appeal in our culture, where popular understandings of social phenomena are dominated by individualistic, psychological explanations and routinely lack any consideration of the effect of social structural forces on individual lives.

Although Pipher admits she is generationally far removed from girls today and so is uncertain of the meaning of their practices, a bigger limitation is perhaps less about generation than her unwillingness to more fully analyze the multiple social forces that shape girls' lives. Reminiscent of Carol Gilligan's (1982) early work, gender appears here as the most significant dimension of girls' selves, leaving race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality analytically subordinate. In centering gender, Pipher does not adequately explore the ways that girls' practices, especially the ones that disturb her (such as makeup, tattoos, piercing, drugs, school refusal), often mark hierarchical class and racial/ethnic relations among girls themselves and are not solely the consequence of gender inequality. The girls I had come to admire most, girls who faced the biggest odds in our multi-stratified society and whose strength and creative resistances inspired me, were not simply poisoned by a mass culture that teaches them gender inferiority. Girls do not define themselves only in relationship to boys in a heterosexual matrix; "one can 'become a woman' in opposition to other women" (Alarcón 1990, 360).

This is, of course, not to deny that discourses on gender are at work in shaping the identities and structuring the futures of the girls I came to know. But studies of girls often focus on early adolescence, describing young girls first encountering societal strictures on their gendered performances, whereas I spoke with young women who had come out on the other side with multiple ways of negotiating gender, along with other creative negotiations required by their living in a society stratified by race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality as much as gender. Girls performed different versions of femininity that were integrally linked to and inseparable from their class and racial/ethnic performances. Multiple social hierarchies were at work in the "styles" that girls like Tara, Lorena, and others employed.

The same week I read *Reviving Ophelia*, the author was featured on the front page of a *USA Weekend* insert in my local paper as a promoter

of “family values.” 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). The article notes that the family values “chorus” is “coming from all corners” and that Pipher’s (1996) version has a liberal face. Indeed, although naming “family breakdown” as the cause for virtually all social ills is based on dubious social science, it has become a rallying cry across the political spectrum. As Judith Stacey explains, the “revisionist campaign for family values” of the political left (read centrist), like the political right, promotes the claim that two-parent heterosexual married couples and their biological children are superior families. But where the right tends to be explicitly antifeminist and homophobic, centrists opt for a “post-feminist family ethic” (1996, 52), which accommodates feminist ideals of gender equality by taking for granted that women have a right to education, equal wages, and a career, but then goes on to argue that women should *choose* to place familial needs above career (presuming that families have the luxury to make such a choice, which working-class families do not). This, they argue, is what is good for kids, good for families, good for America.⁴ The nostalgia present in family values discourse holds, among other things, a desire for youth to adhere to a middle-class ideal of appropriately timed life stages that includes an extended adolescence. Such a norm can be achieved when entry into the full-time job market can be delayed by extending school years to include college. But, of course, this is a route that working-class kids have historically rarely followed, entering adult roles sooner than their middle-class peers.

Coupled with the discourse on “family values” is the so-called “youth crisis,” often coded black (and at times brown), which presumably includes too much sex (think teen pregnancy) and violence (think gangs). In political debate this “youth crisis” is rarely linked to the fact of downward mobility among middle-income working-class people, which has produced more low-income youth with uncertain futures and, in particular, an overrepresentation of youth of color among them. “Family values” discourse displaces a discussion of the increasingly gender- and race-shaped class hierarchy, shifting the focus from economic well-being to family structure. In addition to scapegoating family types, it makes youth itself a threatening enemy to be feared. Indeed, the shift of focus toward youth also works to displace finer analyses of growing inequal-

ity.⁵ All this became evident to me as I discovered that the lives of the girl-women I was studying were not so different from adult women's lives, as they too had encountered race discrimination in the job market, low wages in sex-segregated jobs, life choices shaped by avoiding abusive partners, partners who refused to accept parenting responsibilities, a search for low-cost child care, and a struggle to combine parenthood with work and school.

This book, then, presents an ethnographic portrait of working-class white and Mexican-American girls in their senior year of high school in a town in California's Central Valley. The context of these young women's lives includes a deindustrializing economy; the growth of service-sector occupations held largely by men and women 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 very term "working class" anachronistic. My goal was to learn how these young women experience and understand class differences in their peer culture and how their and their parents' class location and racial/ethnic identity shaped the girls' perceptions of social differences at school and the possibilities for their futures.

I examined girls' experience of class difference and identity by documenting and analyzing the "common-sense" categories they used and created to describe and explain class-based differences among themselves.⁶ 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-class and middle-class girls.⁷ Most importantly, I have investigated the ways in which these common-sense class categories are infused with and intersect with gender and racial/ethnic meanings. While the most recent turns in feminist theorizing on identity and experience argue for a stronger understanding of how women's gender identity differs within the category "woman" across racial/ethnic and class lines, at the time of my writing, the race-class-gender trinity remains more often asserted and thought through theoretically, textually, and historically than it is *ethnographically* explored. It is my hope to advance this body of theory by bringing ethnographic data to it, as I describe the lived experience of these intersections in the lives of the young women I studied and the discourses that construct those experiences.

THE SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF WARETOWN

I began my project at a community college in Sacramento, because my main interest was in women from working-class families across racial/ethnic identities and I knew it was there that I would find those students who, for economic and/or academic reasons, had been unable to attend a four-year institution right out of high school. Instructors allowed me into their classrooms to describe my research and to ask for volunteers to be interviewed. I explained that I was interested in the educational experiences of women who were the first generation of their families to go to college. Heads nodded as I spoke, and my list of interviewees grew long. These women (and sometimes men too, who asked to be involved) expressed pleasure that someone cared to talk to them about this experience. I spoke as well with students from my university who had come from working-class families, some of whom had transferred in from community colleges and who told stories of both the stigma associated with this and the interactional work they performed to conceal it when they could. All these college women spoke at length about differences among girls that manifested in clique membership, style, curriculum choice, and participation in school rituals, topics that would later inform the questions I used at Waretown High.

But it wasn't long into the process of interviewing community college women that I became frustrated by the fact that their descriptions of themselves and their high school peers were devoid of context for me. I had to rely on what each of them could *tell* me of their respective high school experiences. What their stories held in common was the description of a youth culture specific to California in the 1990s and no doubt specific to some degree to the largely small-town/rural Central Valley geography. Through their narratives they constructed race and class identities for themselves which were relational, clearly defined by the context of the communities from which they came. But I could not *see* for myself what they meant and where they fit in to the high school and community hierarchy they described. Furthermore, missing from this sample were the experiences of high school students who didn't even make it to the community college.

And so I began making the necessary calls to find a high school in which to conduct my research. I had the good fortune to find a teacher who became an invaluable advocate, helping me gain entrance into Waretown High. Although it wasn't originally part of my criteria, I came to believe it was fortunate that Waretown had a rural setting, rather

than suburban or urban, since this reflected my own schooling experience. I felt at home in Waretown in many ways. It had the look and feel of my own Midwestern farming town: lots of four-by-four trucks with mud and manure on the tires and plenty of American-made cars. I shared this “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984):⁸ the intangible dimension of culture such as smells, sounds, and the rhythm of the voices of rural white people. The difference I felt from Mexican American girls challenged me in many ways, while the commonalities I shared with all Waretown girls informed my analysis in “insider” ways that might have been missing if I were located in another (more urban) context. I was well aware of and could easily relate to the stigma students felt as a consequence of being from a small rural town, from nowhere that matters. Further, I was glad to be able to uncouple the study of working-class and poor youth from an urban setting, since in media accounts they are so often portrayed as one and the same.

Waretown has a population 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 of the population. Approximately 16 percent of the Mexican-American students are Mexican-born, while the remainder are second- and third-generation residents. Located in California’s Central Valley, the town was built on agriculture and the industries that support it. The parents of most of the second-generation Mexican-American girls had immigrated as teens or young adults under the Bracero Program for recruiting farmworkers (in effect from 1942 to 1964).⁹ They joined a stable working- and lower-middle-class Mexican-American community in Waretown, which had been established during an earlier wave of immigration (1920–30) and whose members had become small business owners, labor contractors, and field supervisors. The fathers of white working-class girls I knew often worked in blue-collar industries that support farming such as irrigation, farm machinery, and trucking. Among Mexican-American working-class girls, fathers’ work included occupations similar to working-class whites but also sometimes field labor, and mothers too at times worked in the fields or in canneries. On my back road commute to Waretown each morning, I watched dozens of groups of farmworkers beginning their day’s work in the surrounding fields. In the early fall and late spring months, the relentless Central Valley sun was already warm enough by eight in the morning that I would have rolled down the window of my car.

During the 1980s several large distribution centers settled in the area

to warehouse and distribute products to nearby discount department stores such as Target, Kmart, and PayLess. These centers and stores are now the largest employers in the town, especially for a younger generation of workers. The distribution centers employ primarily men doing warehouse work and trucking while women work in lower-paid retail jobs at the department stores or perform clerical work in the stores and in small businesses around town. The school system, a local hospital, a convalescent home, large grocery stores, smaller department stores, and a variety of small businesses in the shopping mall and around town employ people at various levels of training and consequent income. The children of middle-class professionals were a visible minority at the school. Most were white, but a few were Mexican-American. Their parents worked as teachers, doctors, lawyers, professors, counselors, administrators, or business owners.

About 30 percent of high school students are on the free or reduced-price lunch program. School administrators agreed, however, that this number could be doubled if all eligible students were to apply. One obvious reason that many do not is the stigma associated with standing in a separate lunch line. Almost all students who are in this line daily are Mexican-American, usually sophomores and juniors. Most seniors, white and Mexican-American, leave the school grounds during lunch time (the ability to do so being a status marker) and choose to spend their own money on fast food.

This expenditure was somewhat surprising, as was the fact that many of the students drove their own cars. But almost all of the students with whom I spoke—nearly all of them seniors—had jobs, and I learned that it was economically prudent for even relatively low-income parents to help their teen purchase an inexpensive car. Along with the independence that came with owning one's own car came an expectation from parents that their teens would provide for themselves. While some students from middle-income families were expected to earn their own money for luxury items like designer-brand clothes, most students I spoke with worked and earned money to pay for their car, insurance, gas, food (at least lunch), clothes, shoes, and school expenses (such as a yearbook, senior pictures, and the prom), and also tried to save money for junior college. For some students, parents made it explicit that this contribution was expected, while others explained that although their parents "never said it," they observed the financial strain their parents were under, and they "just knew" they had to take care of themselves. Several of these students worked nearly thirty hours per week. In short,

they made a not insignificant contribution to their family economy by being somewhat self-supporting before they were even adults. It goes without saying that such a work schedule affected students' academic performance and often made it impossible for them to participate in extracurricular school activities.

About 53 percent of Waretown high school graduates go to community colleges, either with plans to complete a one-to-two-year vocational certificate program or with the hope of transferring to a four-year institution. Despite these hopes, the rate of transfer from community colleges to four-year schools nationally is only 20 percent (Grubb 1991), and Waretown students' transfer rate appears to be even lower. Another 28 percent of Waretown graduates go directly to four-year schools; 3 percent attend trade schools; and the remaining 16 percent are without plans for post-secondary education. The status associated with having money for nicer cars and clothes, along with the status differences associated with aspirations for four-year college vs. community college and, related to that, with participation in a vocational vs. college-preparatory curriculum, was a clear source of class and race resentment and helped shape membership in friendship groups.

Waretown consists of many neighborhoods of lower-middle-class and stable working-class homes (both owned and rented). There is some residential segregation by race and class. One neighborhood near the railroad tracks houses mostly impoverished second- and third-generation Mexican Americans, and a sprawling one-story low-income housing project behind the cannery, known as "the projects," is primarily an immigrant community. A white neighborhood near the hospital was usually described as "nice" or "rich," and within it is a private elementary school. A single high school of fifteen hundred students serves the town, but there are several elementary schools, and at times students linked one another's social status with the geographic location of the elementary school they had attended. The one private elementary school is the only private schooling option in Waretown. Thus, both middle-class and working-class students are educated together in middle and high school years.

Over my nine months of participant observation and interviewing, I came to know the clique structure or informal peer hierarchy among students at the school; this 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 gen-

eral mapping, which almost all students agreed on and provided readily and easily when asked. Although there were exceptions, the groups were largely segregated by race/ethnicity and class. Among whites there were “preps,” “hicks,” and “smokers/rockers/trash”; among Mexican-American students, “Mexican preps” and “cholas/cholos” or “hardcores.” There was also a considerable number of students, both white and Mexican-American, who didn’t fit well into any of these categories and were often simply labeled as “others.” At times the white “others” were labeled “skaters/alternatives,” and the self-referent for the group of female Mexican-American “others” I came to know was “las chicas” (the girls).

I found students quite happy and willing to talk about this aspect of their social world. In fact, students were appreciative that I found their peer structure important, for this is an aspect of their lives and of their school experience that many adults (school personnel and parents) either don’t take seriously, dismiss as stereotyping, or avoid talking about in an effort to enact a color-blind and, less consciously, a class-blind social environment. Schools, of course, reflect larger society, and school personnel, in tune with the color-blind political impulse of the times, often took a category-blind approach toward managing social hierarchy among students. Sometimes students too bought into this blindness: they knew the categories were there, but they also knew it was supposedly wrong to acknowledge them. Both students and teachers held many contradictions and expressed much confusion in how they perceived students as individuals versus as members of social groups. This difficulty resulted not only from feeling compelled to think in a category-blind way, but also from the fact that exceptions to the rule came easily to mind. The high visibility of these exceptions to larger patterns challenged the ability of school personnel and students to see the basic class and race patterns of group membership at all. For example, the presence of one Mexican-American student in a clique with nine whites would result in that group’s being most readily identified as “racially mixed.”

When I met students who were exceptions, who didn’t seem to fit into the group they were in, I pushed for explanations and found important insights into how racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual subjectivity intersect with class. I will return to these exceptions in later chapters, but here I want to provide a cursory sketch of students at Waretown High through brief descriptions of the race and class composition of the social groups and also point to patterns of membership. Although I am primarily interested in employing a *relational* conceptualization of class,

where class is understood as a historical process of class conflict and action, always in formation (class as a relationship, not a thing [E. P. Thompson 1963]), it is useful here to employ a *categorical* notion of class (where class is “socioeconomic status,” an aggregate of categories based on occupation, income, and educational attainment, a structure represented a priori). Although I hope to make such a fixed class taxonomy problematic, I do name girls as working-class or middle-class in origin throughout the book, and the sketches below will help readers understand what variables I used to place girls in such categories.

In presenting these groups, I draw on Joseph Howell’s useful distinction between two types of working-class lives in his ethnography of white working-class families (1973). “Settled-living” families are supported by jobs that have relative security, higher pay, and, at times, health benefits. Settled-living lifestyles are orderly and predictable and sometimes include the ownership of a modest home. “Hard-living” families are supported by low-paying, less stable occupations that lack health care benefits and make home ownership impossible—self-employed work, non-union labor, service work—and have lifestyles that are chaotic and unpredictable. Instability in one area of life often contributes to instability in another: a rough marriage might lead to drinking or drug use, which in turn leads to missing work and job loss. Or losing a job might lead to drinking or drug use, an eviction and marital crisis. Hard-living is not desired or intentional, but is a consequence of the difficulties of trying to establish a settled life. For those with minimal education and subsequent low income, there was often too little to be gained from following socially conservative norms. The minimal payoff is often not perceived to be worth the sacrifices involved. Hard-living arose out of this constraining set of life circumstances.

Smokers

The group of mostly white students at the school who were usually referred to as “the smokers” (because they smoked cigarettes), but sometimes “the rockers” (due to their taste for heavy metal music), and occasionally “white trash,” were most often from hard-living families. These were Tara’s friends. They had parents who did not finish or barely finished high school. Typical jobs for mothers included nurse’s aide, grocery store stocker, secretary, and beautician. Fathers’ occupations included a self-employed truck driver, a self-employed vendor, a retired

wood-mill worker, a Vietnam veteran on disability, a non-union janitor, and a port-a-potty installer. Sometimes hard-living students hinted at illegal income-generating strategies as well. It was difficult to find seniors among this group, as many had dropped out or had been kicked out of school. These students generally did not have plans beyond high school, as they were just hoping to graduate.

Cholas and Cholos

The cholas and cholos (or chola/os) also often called “hard-cores,” were primarily Mexican-American students from hard-living families. Both terms were often used to indicate that a student was in or wanted to be in a “gang,” and therefore dressed the part. In actuality, chola/o refers to a Mexican-American street style that sometimes marks identification with gangs but can merely mark racial/ethnic belonging; the actual degree of commitment to a gang exists on a continuum. Nonetheless, cholas/os, like pachucas and pachucos a generation before them, are—often wrongly—assumed to be engaged in criminal behavior.¹⁰ Fathers commonly worked in the fields or as dishwashers or doing food delivery; mothers, in the cannery, in the fields, as caretakers, and as domestics. There were two groupings of cholas/os, which represented two gang affiliations: *sureño* (south) and *norteño* (north). The sureños tended to be immigrant students who primarily spoke Spanish, while the norteños tended to be second-generation Mexican Americans whose primary language at school was English. Consequently, there was a pattern of class difference between these two groups, although there were exceptions to every pattern.

Because I was interested in young women’s transition to adult lives and class futures, I limited my sample to studying girls in their senior year. Significantly, although there were senior boys in this category, there were no senior girls. Girls who performed chola identity in junior high and into early high school years had left the high school to attend either a continuation high school in Waretown or an adult education program, both of which offered diplomas more quickly for fewer credit hours. Those with babies had chosen this option because the shorter classroom hours made it easier to combine school with parenting. Some, like their male counterparts, were forced to try to complete high school in an alternative fashion after being kicked out of Waretown High for a variety of school “violations.”

Las Chicas

Other Mexican-American girls, like Lorena, who had performed chola identity in their earlier years, simply “matured out” (Vigil 1988) and remained in high school.¹¹ They were part of the “others” that had no obvious distinction, but they labeled themselves “las chicas.” Many of las chicas were identified by other students as gang-affiliated. In truth, las chicas disapproved of gang violence but were sympathetic to the plight of boys who were involved because these were their brothers and friends, boys they had grown up with. Thus, their style was explicitly linked to a racial/ethnic politic, identification with a gang, without commitment to gang violence. These girls tended to be from settled-living families. Their parents had sometimes finished high school and managed to secure one stable job between them. They sometimes owned modest homes, and often at least one parent’s job provided the family with health care benefits. Mothers worked in occupations such as seasonal cannery or field work, other factory work, as a dental assistant, a mail sorter, or a nurse’s aide in a retirement home. Occupations of fathers included a garbage man, a fieldwork foreman, a janitor, a painter, a tractor equipment company foreman, a car salesman, a utility company serviceman, and a truck driver. These girls hoped to go to vocational business schools to complete one-to-two-year programs or to community colleges to complete certificate programs; a few hoped to transfer to four-year schools.

Skaters

The largest mass of white students were those who didn’t fit easily into any well-defined clique, but who self-identified as “alternative” or “skaters.” Like las chicas, they were from settled-living families that had modest homes and health care benefits. Their parents had usually finished high school. Some had gone, later in life, to a community college for a one-to-two-year training program—usually the mothers, entering programs in secretarial science, word processing, dental assistance, or accounting. Mothers’ work included clerical and accounting jobs at local businesses, a dental hygienist, and an administrative assistant. Examples of fathers’ work were a mechanic, a disabled Vietnam veteran, a groundskeeper, a maintenance man, a warehouse foreman, a telephone truck serviceman, and a beer factory worker. These girls planned to go

to community colleges with the explicit goal of transferring to four-year schools, and a few planned to go directly to four-year state schools.

Hicks

The “hicks” were mostly white students distinguished by an interest in agriculture. Some came from farming families, while others lived in town, their interest in agriculture and animals not linked to family work. These students ranged from hard-living to settled-living, depending on parents’ jobs and incomes. Mothers’ jobs included manager of a beauty salon, school-lunchroom worker, and administrative assistant. Examples of fathers’ work included an electrician, a self-employed painter, a police officer, and a post office clerk. Most of these students planned to go to community college; some of the boys planned to apprentice in blue-collar industries right out of high school.

Preps

The “preps” were primarily white students who were the most middle-class of all students at the school. Their parents were often college educated, although some families had gained income and community prestige by having done quite well over the generations in some blue-collar industry. Mothers worked, for example, as a general contractor, a teacher, a nurse, a small-business manager, a special education teacher, and a junior college teacher. Fathers’ work included a professor, a contractor, a business owner, a banker, a teacher, a lawyer, and an accountant. These students had aspirations to attend private colleges or public universities.

ON METHOD AND ETHNOGRAPHIC REFLEXIVITY

My research included “hanging out” with girls in classrooms and hallways, during lunch hours, at school dances, sports events, Future Homemakers of America (FHA) meetings, a Future Farmers of America (FFA) hay-bucking contest and similar events, meetings of MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, the Chicano student movement organization), in coffee shops, restaurants, and the shopping mall, in the school parking lot, near the bleachers behind the school, at birthday parties, and sometimes sitting cross-legged on the floor of girls’ bedrooms “just talkin’.” During the school year, I spent almost every day

at the school, often returning in the evening to attend an extracurricular event and sometimes on weekends to meet and “kick it” with girls. I came to know more than sixty girls well, about half of which were Mexican-American and half of which were white, and many more as acquaintances. I talked with them about such details of their lives as dating, friendships, partying, clothes, makeup, popular culture, school, family, work, and their hopes and expectations for the future. I asked them numerous questions about their families, such as their parents’ and grandparents’ educational and occupational history and income. I asked them how much time their parents spent working and what they did for leisure, what various family members watched on television and did or did not read, where they shopped, what they believed their parents’ political views were, how parents seemed similar to or different from their teachers. And I asked questions about what cars the family owned, the meals they ate, the vacations they did or did not take, the neighborhoods they lived in, and whether or not they had health insurance. As indicators of educational achievement, I documented which track each girl was on and how she came to be placed there, which girls made it to graduation and which did not, and each girl’s post-high school plans for work, vocational schooling, or college. At the end of the school year, I compared girls’ plans to the reality of what colleges they were accepted at and/or what jobs they secured. In short, I spent much time just wandering about the school, not really an insider but not a complete outsider either, making mental notes of who was where and doing what, and looking for students who had free time to talk. I’d routinely slip into the bathroom where I hid behind a stall door and recorded observations in my notebook.

Because it was my goal to compare girls across race and class locations, the most difficult task was attempting to enter the life-world of so many different social actors. The fact that I was crossing cliques was an enormous added worry for me, concerned as I was that this transgression would inhibit the various groups of girls from opening up and thus jeopardize my ability to establish trust. Being identified as a “researcher” seemed at times to engender trust, however. When I asked Lisa, a white girl, if she felt uncomfortable talking to me about her perception of the Mexican-American girls we were discussing, she responded, “No. It is okay because you are the objective researcher.” I decided that this was not the time to explain to her the crisis of ethnographic authority and the challenges it poses to the ideal of an impartial science. In her mind, her description of me as “objective” made her feel

it was safe to talk, as it meant that I was not going to tell the Mexican-American girls what she said about them, that I was not engaged in the network of gossip that students generally were. I listened, and I asked questions, but I did not talk about other students.

My awkward status as someone without any clear institutionalized role at the school was a source of discomfort at first; this lessened with time but never fully went away. I feel indebted to Penelope Eckert (1989), to whose book I retreated each time I worried that this kind of study was an impossibility. It eased my mind to read her description of her role at the school where she studied “jocks and burnouts,” with its many parallels to my daily experience. I couldn’t help but think that the process would have been much easier if I had been there to talk to teachers, since our shared “adult” status removed us from the social world of students for whom daily school life and its microscopically observed interactions were emotionally consequential in large ways. And, as noted, it would have been easier had I been there to befriend only one particular group of girls, rather than trying to negotiate relationships with several groups of girls who did not view each other in friendly ways. Instead, I had no social home and was a transgressor of a kind, crossing all social categories, and always potentially perceived as a betrayer of confidence (both across groups of girls and across the student/teacher divide). This was difficult terrain to negotiate and an uncomfortable space to inhabit on a daily basis; I would come home exhausted. But I was probably more concerned about my role at the school than anyone there was. The last week of school, when I thanked one of the administrators for her help and for tolerating my presence, she commented, “You really became a piece of the landscape here.” It was reassuring to hear that I had not been as conspicuous as I felt.

I managed the student/teacher divide by avoiding teachers as much as possible. Gaining student confidence required that I distance myself from adult school personnel. So I waited to interview teachers, counselors, and administrators formally until the last month of school. When I did interview them, I did so in private places like faculty lounges where we would not be seen by students.

Managing the clique divide proved more difficult. At times, it felt remarkably easy because of the degree to which students in cliques physically segregated themselves at the school, parceling the school into geographic territories. I could easily spend time with preps in the student government class, with hicks in the “ag” department or the far end of the parking lot, with las chicas in the business building, and with smok-

ers behind the school. But sites that were ambiguous territory caused problems. One day as I walked between class periods, across the center of the school toward las chicas who watched me approaching, I was intercepted by Jennifer, a prep girl, who made kind of public claim to me, greeting me with a hug, and saying loudly, “Hi, Julie! Do you want to talk again today? Talking to me was particularly helpful, wasn’t it?” On another day I saw the shock on the face of Amber, a prep girl, when she spotted me walking to the parking lot with Lorena, whom preps perceived as a “hard-core.” And Shelly, a self-defined “hick,” stopped talking to me after she saw me talking and laughing, having a good time, with a group of Mexican-American girls in the lunchroom one day. The lunchroom and “hallways” (the outdoor spaces between buildings full of classrooms) were difficult spaces to negotiate, and while I spent much time at the beginning of the year making observations there, as I began to get close to each group of girls, I found myself avoiding such mixed areas until after the bell rang and everyone was in their place for the hour. Everyone knew, of course, that I was crossing groups, and as the year went on, an unspoken understanding was enacted, where each group of girls and I exchanged only pleasant “hello’s” in mixed settings and reserved further interaction for when I came to visit them in their “home” at the school.

I met the preps through a teacher who taught a college-prep class and in whose class I made a formal presentation on who I was and what my project was about and asked for volunteers. This worked well with this group, who were the kind of students likely to volunteer, but was not the most feasible approach for working-class students, who were likely to count themselves out of such an activity. These students were much harder to get to know, and therefore I had to use a variety of strategies for meeting them. I sometimes met them through a trusted teacher or the school nurse, but usually, and most effectively, through other students, as I interviewed girls in a network of friendship circles. It only took getting to know one girl in a clique to open up the whole group to me. In fact, I came to know a majority of the girls through other girls, and this helped distance me from the adult authority status of school personnel. For the most part I introduced myself as “a student from the university” doing “a study of high school girls.” After explaining to students in a variety of contexts who I was and why I was there, I gave them a consent form to sign, which stated my guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality; I also gave them a consent form for their parents to sign.

In order to disguise the identities of these girls, I have, of course, changed their names and altered information about each girl, for example, switching occupations of one girl's parents with those of another in parallel social locations. This means that although a given characteristic of or a specific incident involving a particular girl might seem to members of the Waretown community to make that girl identifiable, in fact the various events, beliefs, and statements associated with a name in this book cannot be assumed to belong to any one girl. Finally, I have also used pseudonyms for and altered facts about teachers and other school personnel when it was necessary to do so for the sake of anonymity.

I was thirty-one the year of my fieldwork, but probably looked younger. I never lied about my age, extent of education, or other facts of my life, but didn't disclose much unless asked. I was often mistaken by teachers and administrators for a student, mostly because I dressed like one. My appearance worked as both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, looking youthful helped distance me from teachers and parents and adults in general and therefore probably did help students feel comfortable with me. Further, we shared the status of "student" (albeit from different institutions), and this category seemed to be key, suggesting that one has not yet begun adult life and is subordinate to someone older and with more authority. The distinction between graduate and undergraduate status was lost on many of the girls. On the other hand, I had to be careful not to look too close in age or dress, which could have backfired by making me come across as disingenuous, trying too hard to pass myself off as something I wasn't. I didn't try to adjust to each group I spent time with, but rather wore a generic "costume" that was virtually the same everyday. I wore Levi's (not too baggy, not too tight) and the cheap version (\$9.99 at Payless Shoes) of basic brown leather clunky-heeled shoes that were in fashion at the moment. I wore variously colored scoop-necked T-shirts and in the winter an open flannel shirt over them. In an effort to acknowledge my difference and not look like I was trying too hard to fit in, I chose to carry my canvas shoulder bag rather than the backpack that most prep students favored.

In short, I looked like an "other" of sorts, but not terribly "hip," which I believed was the safest category to occupy. Students' perceptions of me varied depending on who they were. Preps seemed to believe I was one of them. After all, I was working on a degree at a university, something they planned to do, and they seemed to be quite comfortable

with me. This was ironic given that they were one of the groups of girls I felt most uncomfortable with. I was not college-prep when I was in high school, and I found myself in awe (at times even intimidated) at the amount of knowledge they had at such an early age. I admit I also experienced occasional pangs of resentment toward them because of the cultural capital they took for granted.

Working-class students, I believe, saw me as a college student who was learning how to be a counselor or psychologist, one of these occupations that work with “troubled” teens. This was evident one day when Tara attempted to get out of class by telling a teacher she wanted to go talk to “the counselor lady.” Her strategy of deception with the teacher was to give me more status than she knew I had by deeming me a counselor already, as opposed to a student, and by making me older than she thought I was by defining me as a lady.

I felt far closer to white working-class students in experience, but this was not necessarily reciprocated. Given my mobility upward from my own settled-living location, I knew these students perceived me as other. Explaining where I originally came from was not necessarily the best strategy for establishing trust, since it could serve to increase their feelings of failure. This is where I feel the most ambivalence about class mobility. There is no way around the fact that I unintentionally inflicted class injury, as people who are exceptions often do. Nonetheless, these girls also often appreciated and benefited from my attention. Working-class girls, across race, were happy that I was not studying only the preps, that they too counted as worthy of being talked to. And my attention sometimes gave them status among other students; they mattered in this thing I was doing as much as preps did.

For my part, the most complicated relationship was the one I had with Mexican-American girls. I had a certain amount of automatic legitimacy based on the fact that the teacher who was my advocate at the school was a white woman whose racial politics they trusted (so much so that students considered asking her to teach a Chicano studies class). White liberals were hardly thick on the ground in this community, and the mere fact that I was willing to speak openly on and ask frank questions about race seemed to automatically engender a certain level of trust among these girls. I asked them directly how they felt about me as a “white girl” from the university writing a story about them, attempting to represent them. Though they occasionally wondered if the multiple factors influencing their lives might be hard for me as a cultural outsider to understand, they also were concerned that I might choose not to

include their stories. Ana explained, “You can’t just write about the white girls. It would only be half a story, half a book.” And Marisol added, “Besides, you are studying girls. And so we have that in common.” For the most part, these girls generally expressed to me that I should not worry about my outsider status. And that is what made me worry most of all.

I came of age intellectually during the crisis of ethnographic authority and fully felt the associated angst and paralysis, wondering if I could or should study anyone socially located in places which are other to myself. The critique of authority and the exploration of experimental ways of writing ethnography reflexively have come from interdisciplinary feminist and ethnic studies and from postmodern theory.¹² This relatively recent transformation in social theory has been, in part, a consequence of the civil rights and women’s liberation movements, in which disenfranchised people began to gain some access to higher education and to challenge conservative scholarship that had, either explicitly or implicitly, validated the status quo of inequality. The intervention that feminist and ethnic studies scholars made was to identify the androcentrism and ethnocentrism of much of what passed as value-free science and to argue instead that all knowledge is perspectival.

In terms of qualitative research, this led to a questioning of the ethnographer’s ability to offer an objective account. In other words, this turn toward antifoundationalism meant recognizing that language does not *reflect* reality but is *constitutive* of it. That is, the ethnographic text is not a transparent account of reality but a product of the interaction and negotiation between researcher and researched. As Daphne Patai describes it, the interview is “a point of intersection between two subjectivities—theirs and mine, their cultural assumptions and mine, their memories and my questions, their sense of self and my own, their hesitations and my encouraging words or gestures (or sometimes vice versa), and much much more” (1988, 146). To acknowledge the possibility of profound cultural differences between researcher and researched means recognizing that the “intersubjective ground for objective forms of knowledge is precisely what is [or may be] missing” in the ethnographic encounter (Clifford 1988, 35). Consequently, the written product might then be better understood as a “partial truth” (Clifford 1998), since an author cannot just pretend to be letting her subjects tell their story or supposedly give them voice without her analytical mediation. Reflexive ethnography demands that as ethnographers we point to our own subjectivity, acknowledge that it undoubtedly shapes the story we tell,

and—most importantly—recognize the fact of the power we wield, the power of interpretation. The text is not simply the result of an even negotiation between ethnographer and subject, because in the end authority literally remains with the ethnographer, as *author* of that text.

In other words, to perform reflexive ethnography means to recognize that the ethnographer does not offer a “view from nowhere” (Bordo 1990) or what Donna Haraway (1988) calls the “god trick,” the ideal of an objective, value-free, aperspectival knowledge. What is required instead is a radical reflexivity that acknowledges that there is always a *place* from which we speak. Unfortunately, this refutation of impartial knowledge has been widely misunderstood as a celebration of relativism, that all perspectives are equal. Indeed, they are not. Rather, what post-modern theory poses is a challenge to *contextualize* (P. Williams 1991). It is not that all perspectives are equal, but that they are all situated, contextual, from a place invested with more or less power. From this perspective, reflexive ethnographic practice might lead, as Haraway explains, toward the “joining of partial views,” “ongoing critical interpretation among ‘fields’ of interpreters” (communities, not individuals), with the recognition that some views are institutionally and culturally more empowered than others (1988, 590).

The concern over the lack of intersubjectivity, the division of intellectual labor, and an imbalance of power between a researcher and her subjects has, in contemporary work, been most often discussed in relationship to racial/ethnic difference and the difference of first-world/third-world global inequality (although early on feminists were quick to point out the problematic lack of intersubjectivity between researcher and subject based on gender). Within feminist studies, a series of concerns has been expressed about white Western women studying women in the third world and white women studying women of color in the United States, which I want to point to here. The key problem was/is a kind of essentialism whereby white Western feminists assumed similarities with third-world women on the basis of gender, ignoring important differences among women across culture, history, and geography.¹³

Attempts to correct for this manifested yet another problem, which Marnia Lazreg has appropriately labeled “essentializing otherness.” This occurs when the recognition of difference is paramount but includes a tendency to define “others” as all the same: “on the other side of difference, they must be, they are, all alike” (1988, 93). The concern here is that third-world women were/are represented by cultural outsiders in ways that portrayed them as eternal victims. This denied them

selfhood and presented them as persons without agency, often as women overdetermined by religion, tradition, and patriarchy, where those three phenomena are given privileged explanatory power and are conceptualized as static and unchanging: on the other side of difference, history, it seems, stands still (Mohanty 1991). Here “others” are “made into the bearers of unexplained categories,” having no existence or individuality outside of those categories (Lazreg 1988, 94).

In short, there was/is among white Western feminists a failure to see that “others” are for themselves and not for “us”; they are not here to prove universalist theories of patriarchy, which was the project of an early second-wave feminism that desired global sisterhood. Pointing out to white women the arrogance and power that inheres in their claims of sameness with women of color, Elizabeth Spelman has explained that “women of color have been distrustful of white women who point to similarities between them when it seems politically expedient to do so and to dissimilarities when it does not” (1988, 139). Consequently, the critics of feminist essentialism have asserted the need for vigilant attentiveness to the *specificity* of the kinds of struggles and the kinds of resistances women engage and for a focus on differences among women and the salience of social forces of domination, beyond gender, to women’s lives. In my account of Mexican-American and white girls, I make claims of *both* similarity and difference between them, attending as best I can to the implications of such claims. My hope is that this work makes a contribution to the joining of partial views.

The critiques of essentialized subjects also lead to a scholarship that prioritizes deconstructing monolithic notions of racial subjects and the notion of an authentic Chicano (for example) cultural identity.¹⁴ Rosa Linda Fregoso and Angie Chabram, while attending to the political utility of naming a shared culture, shared conditions of oppression, and a shared history of conquest, point simultaneously to differences within the category Chicana/o. Attention to differences *within* is requisite in order to recognize the historically constructed nature of racial/ethnic subjectivity. Difference between Chicanos and Chicanas based on gender is a key issue raised by Chicana feminists, but beyond this they point to the many other variables that must be considered, such as “the heterogeneous experiences of migration, conquest, and regional variation” (1990, 206) as well as sexuality, generation, Spanish fluency, and skin color. In short, Chicana/o identity is an ongoing production, historically changing, and not an accomplished and static fact. Echoing Lazreg, Fre-

goso and Chabram explain that it is crucial not to make the mistake of taking all people of color as “different” from the “humanist” subject and assume that they are transparent among themselves.

The ethnographic dilemma I faced was that my cultural identity as a white woman might result in an analysis that was not sensitive to Mexican-American culture and racial/ethnic identity, either, on the one hand, by failing to *recognize* cultural specificity or, on the other hand, by *reducing* girls to their ethnicity, whereby everything they do can be attributed to and is overdetermined by “their” culture, ignoring intracultural variation. I felt more certain about my ability to avoid the latter pitfall. As I listened to Mexican-American girls narrate their life stories, differences proliferated among them, and their lives defied common ideas about Mexican-American culture. (There were divorced parents, working mothers, small families, an occasional abortion, parents with as high expectations for their daughter as their son, and in one case a family of practicing Jehovah’s Witnesses.) Regarding the former pitfall, I did feel uncertain about my representation of Mexican-American girls’ lives, and I contemplated daily the possible ways in which my own white, settled-living cultural identity shaped both my interaction with the girls and my textual representation of them. But as Fred Pfeil helps me explain, I believe we can attempt to understand the exploitative relations that people who are other to us are embedded in “well enough to serve them in a struggle against those relations” (1994, 226).

In the end, the uncertainty I felt about representing Mexican-American girls’ lives led me to believe that I had a false sense of certainty about my ability to represent white voices. It is very easy to be deceived by what *appears* as cultural sameness. But when we begin to unpack racial/ethnic categories, including whiteness, it becomes clear that racial/ethnic sameness is not enough to lay claims to intersubjectivity. Class differences in particular, as manifested within a U.S. population (as opposed to a first-world/third-world global class divide), have not often been considered in the literature on reflexive ethnography, since class, as a basis for identity politics, has not commonly been made salient in the politics of theory. Racial difference was far and away not the only axis of my identity that mattered, not the only difference on the basis of which I felt challenged about my position to say anything about a particular girl’s life. I often felt like an outsider around experiences of sexuality, family abuse, and class. At other times, I felt like an insider on the basis of those same topics. The logic of an identity politics in

which identity is conceptualized as static and clearly bounded doesn't easily acknowledge the *continuum* of experience, *relative* sameness and difference, and *degrees* of intersubjectivity that allow for emotional empathy and political alliance. Discussions of the uneven power relations embedded in ethnography usually focus on the ethnographer's unavoidable exploitation of her "subjects." Ironically, I feel I betrayed the more privileged preps the most because I knew my emotional allegiance was to working-class girls, and I knew I would often portray preps through the eyes of working-class students, for whom they are villains of a sort.

Chabram and Fregoso go on to draw our attention yet closer to the power differentials embedded in theory when they note the irony of the fact that the racialized other in much postmodern theorizing of the subject is discussed as an abstraction, while in reality this other is actually very concrete and in physical proximity to those who theorize about her/him. The traditional site for ethnographic work, the "third world," is now less isolated from the "first world," causing some anthropologists to begin doing ethnography "at home." Consequently, what was always true for the sociologist is increasingly true for the anthropologist: the subject is no longer out there, far removed in time and space from the ethnographer and her textual production, but is here at home and likely to be cleaning her office or busing her table. Moreover, with the gains (limited and reversible though they may be) of the civil rights era, the other is increasingly present in the academic institution in the person of students and/or colleagues, ready to talk back, to make interventions into theories and assumptions that fail to recognize the partiality of perspective. It was/is easier to support the fallacy of an objective researcher when subjects were not empowered to talk back, because of either a lack of geographic proximity or a lack of cultural and economic power (Chabram 1990). This was never more clear to me than when just one year after completing my ethnographic work, one of the (white middle-class) girls from my study showed up as a student in my university classroom, able to raise her hand and deny my authority as I spoke about my research, a situation I both feared and welcomed. Ethnographers cannot take for granted a radical separation between the world of academe and the ethnographic site. We cannot "presuppose a geographical, geopolitical, and intellectual distance between the worlds of the researcher and the subject[s]" of our research (Chabram 1990, 238).

With this one exception, the young women in my classroom are not the actual girls I studied, though occasionally there are girls who rep-

resent the girls I studied, who could easily have been them—a middle-class Chicana or the rare and exceptional Chicana or white girl from a working-class family. But by and large this does not happen because, with few exceptions, working-class girls do not make it to the university. The colonizing aspect of ethnography where the ethnographer writes about subjects who are not empowered to talk back is present in my text. Even as people of color had become increasingly represented in academe (though that now appears to be reversing), working-class people, of any color, are rarely present here.

The stories I've written are inevitably informed by my cultural identity. My text is "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988) because it cannot be otherwise. But while all knowledge is perspectival, it is based not only on one's cultural identity but also on one's political identity. An early form of identity politics seemed to suggest that an author might provide to readers a list of her identity categories with an assumption that this made visible to the reader how she perceived the world and, most importantly, what her blind spots were. But such an idea is based on the notion that identity is fixed and static rather than fluid and historicized, and presumes that one's knowledge of the world is based on some kind of raw experience unmediated by cultural and political discourse. As debates in identity politics wore on and the need for alliances became more urgent, the limitation of this kind of conceptualization of identity politics where one's political position is assumed to flow rather automatically from one's cultural identity began to appear. Some argued for a move beyond this most constraining, and perhaps naive, version of identity politics, suggesting instead that one can—indeed one *must*, to achieve social transformation—learn to read the world critically, as persons who are other to you might do.¹⁵

Valerie Walkerdine usefully explains why a confession of one's identity categories is an inadequate tool to provide to a reader when she says, "I had to take seriously the position from which I thought, felt, observed, wrote. But that position was not a fixed place, which told me that because I was born white, female, and working class, that I should see the world in a particular way, but that the ways I had been brought up to see the world, my very subjectivity, was created, produced, regulated in the social realm itself. There was not even some certain 'I' to do the observing, even if I took the step to present myself" (1997, 59). Where Walkerdine then inserts herself prolifically into her text, exploring the possible effects of her fluid class identity (from working to middle) and her self as the product of postwar class formation, I choose to

insert myself only occasionally. Although my identity shapes my text, this happens in ways that are not necessarily transparent to me, and making them so would require layers of analysis of the ways in which I have been historically produced as a racialized, classed, sexual, gendered, and political subject. Though I see the value in the most reflexive ethnographies, which some dismiss as egocentric, I prefer in this book to state my recognition that my text is inevitably shaped by my cultural and political identity and then get on with the business of producing a book about the girls I came to know at Waretown.

A NOTE ON GENDER AND METHOD

Having read ethnographic accounts of youth subcultures in which researchers described and privileged “hanging out” in public spaces as the method for acquiring data and gaining insider status, I went into this project expecting to do the same. Certainly girls do hang out, as boys do, and I gleaned much information from being with them in public places. But the ways girls hang out or, as it is more contemporarily expressed, “kick it” and spend time with one another were such that sitting in the corner of the library with Blanca talking intimacies, or having an hour-long phone conversation with Maggie or a two-and-a-half hour conversation in a coffee shop with Amber and Jennifer, or talking at the kitchen table with girls at Lorena’s house did not feel like artificial environments for “interviews.” Since girls do “girl talk,” often in sets of twos or threes, this was equally participant observation, as I was “doing” high school girl identity. A male colleague challenged me when he scoffed, “Talking on the phone is hardly ethnography.” But how could it not be when a large part of what girls do is to talk one-on-one, and at great length?

Girls’ pleasure in “just talking” and the blurring of this boundary between participant observation and formal interviewing became apparent one day when Lorena and I spent a two-hour block of time talking on the lawn in front of the school. When the period ended, she said, “Let’s go meet the girls, they are coming out of class.” When we met them, Lorena bragged, “We talked for so long, the tape stopped twice!” And Blanca competed, “When we talked yesterday, it was so long the batteries died and we kept havin’ ta change them.” On another occasion, as I wandered the halls with two girls who were skipping class, we were confronted by a teacher, who asked, “Why aren’t you girls in class?” Wendy attempted an excuse, which the teacher interrupted, saying, “Oh

sure. So you weren't just out here talking huh?" In other words, he knew that what we were doing that kept us from our class, our violation, was "talking."

This is, no doubt, a significant part of the reason why the issue of betrayal among girls is so pronounced. Girl talk, the disclosure of emotional injuries and insecurities, is often the basis for friendship and is what bonds girls. Therefore, to be seen doing the same, to be talking with another girl who is not a friend, is a potential act of betrayal. Donna Gaines explains this well in her ethnography of suburban teens. "Rule is, the street belongs to the boys. They are more public in orientation—they'll talk to anybody about anything. . . . But the girls are a little different. They're insular; they mostly hang out in pairs, rarely more than trios. They won't let you penetrate unless they see you every day, and then it's just friendly and polite. You have to be a best friend to get really close. Their conversations tend to be more local, personal, private. The girls are a subculture within a subculture" (1990, 63).

My entrée into dialogues with girls was a very gendered experience. Where Douglas Foley (1990), for example, notes that he spent much time hanging out in the gym playing hoops with the boys, my connection with girls was not mediated by a physical activity that would enable us to interact casually without much personal dialogue. I got to know girls while hanging out, talking more than doing, where we connected in conversations about things we saw in women's magazines, about boy-friends, whether or not we plan to have kids, and fashion. What we were wearing was often a topic of conversation. The silver rings I wore turned out to be a common opener for benign conversation. But clothing was a tricky subject to navigate; inevitably it revolved around an unarticulated awareness of body image, since girls this age (or perhaps women of almost all ages) are interminably and unfortunately aware of their body size and shape in relationship to unreasonable beauty norms and to each other. I found myself each morning trying to dress in ways that were appealing, yet not competitive or threatening.

At first I had questioned whether I was hanging out effectively, whether I had found the "action," but as the school year went by, I began to rethink what I first imagined as my own social ineptness or lack of ability as a researcher as more likely a consequence of a masculine bias in the literature on methodology. An integral part of this bias is the sensationalism of male youth violence, or at least of danger, and the ethnographer's desire to be where the action is, what Judith Stacey has dubbed "action-hero ethnography."¹⁶ But the danger and violence

experienced by women often occurs in private spaces and is often experienced as a solitary event. For example, in contrast to the many films primarily about male youth, *Girlstown* (1995) provides an alternative representation: we come to know a girl who was raped in the back seat of a car and another who is battered by her child's father. In the film the girls learn of each other's experiences through girl talk and then are empowered to collectively confront those who violated them. Similarly, Lisa Lewis (1990) offers an analysis of music videos in which she finds images that suggest to girls two kinds of intervention: "access signs," in which girls, aware of the attendant dangers, collectively take over male public space; but also "discovery signs," in which girls are found taking pleasure in each other's company in private spaces. The invisibility or lack of legitimacy given by school ethnographers to girl talk or "bed-room culture" reveals the privileging of public over private spheres of life as that which is important ethno to graph.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the academic theory debates that I both employ and critique in my analysis. Readers less interested in those debates might choose to skip this chapter. Chapters 3–5 present the ethnographic descriptions of the groups of girls I came to know. Chapter 3 focuses on working-class Mexican-American girls, and chapter 4 on working-class white girls. Chapter 5 looks at both white and Mexican-American working-class girls who are exceptional in that they are taking college-prep classes and plan to attend four-year institutions. In chapter 6 I explore relationships between various groups of girls across class and race. In the concluding chapter, I speak to the larger social and historical forces that shape the lives of this particular generation of young women and draw conclusions about the utility of the concepts of performance and performativity.

This organization deliberately decenters white middle-class girls, although they remain present in the analysis. It is no surprise, however, that preps were centered at the school—quite literally, as their hanging-out territory was at the middle of the campus in front of the library and near the buildings that house most of the college-prep courses. They were centered by school personnel as well, by the mere fact that, of all the students at Waretown High, they best met the normative ideal held out for student success, which is college attendance. On my first day at the school an administrator took me to an honors classroom saying,

“These are our best and our brightest.” There I met Rhonda, who invited me to tag along as she went about the school putting up posters of student government candidates. As we walked around the grounds, she pointed out and named each building as she told me about her family’s summer vacation, which included trips to various universities she was considering. When we passed by a building she had failed to identify and I asked what it was, she commented, “Oh, those are home economics courses. I don’t know *what* those people do in there.” When I asked about a group of white girls standing inside the door, she looked at me quizzically, then smiled at my naïveté, and explained, “Oh, they’re smokers. They won’t talk to you.” And later, when I asked about another group of girls standing near the business building, she was again perplexed by my interest and responded, “Oh, well, those are *Mexican* girls,” as if to say, they don’t count; if you are here to study girls (read white, middle-class, normal), you are here to study us. At the end of our tour, she politely offered her assistance: “Let me know which of my friends you want to talk to.”