

PUERTO RICAN WANNABES

Sexual Spectacle and the Marking of Race, Class, and Gender Boundaries

AMY C. WILKINS

University of Massachusetts–Amherst

The “Puerto Rican wannabe” is one contemporary, local expression of contested racial identities—identities that are also inflected with class and gender meanings. This study uses interviews with local youth and young adults to explore their use of the caricature of the wannabe to create and contest race, class, and gender boundaries. The wannabe’s challenge to racially designated categories provides a symbol onto which nonwannabe kids project their own stereotypes, anxieties, and desires. The stories told about the wannabe in this study reveal both the persistence and the fragility of race, class, and gender identities and underline the centrality of sexuality in bolstering and undermining them. Boundary negotiations in one category rely on and affect other categories: In this study, the contestation of racial boundaries reestablishes heteronormative and hierarchical gender relations.

Keywords: *gender; race; class; sexuality; youth culture*

The “Puerto Rican wannabe” is a caricature of racial, class, and gender inauthenticity drawn by “authentic” white, Puerto Rican, and Black kids. In this study, I interviewed both wannabes and nonwannabes to explore the symbol of the wannabe in the ongoing construction of race, class, and gender categories. By challenging the boundaries of racially designated, but also classed and gendered, categories, the wannabe provides a symbol onto which other young people project their own stereotypes, anxieties, and desires. While wannabes have their own stories to tell, these stories should not be read as the truth but instead as another version of the negotiation of ethnic, class, and gender meanings. Together, these stories unveil the persistence and the fragility of ethnic, class, and gender identities and underline the centrality of sexuality in both bolstering and undermining them.

“Puerto Rican wannabe” is a label applied to a particular kind of white girl in a particular geographical context and a particular historical moment. While her label might be local, her iconography is not. She is seen across the United States in adolescent and now young adult cultural lore, popping up frequently as a “wigger”—a

REPRINT REQUESTS: *Amy C. Wilkins, Department of Sociology, Thompson Hall, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003.*

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“white nigger.” Like the wigger, the stereotypical Puerto Rican wannabe rejects white middle-class cultural style, adopting an urban presentation of self associated with people of color. She wears hip-hop clothes and Puerto Rican hairstyles, drinks malt liquor, and smokes Newports. She adopts an attitude, acting tough and engaging in verbal and physical fights. And perhaps most important, she dates and has sex with Black and Puerto Rican men.

The wannabe’s violation of whiteness fascinates and alarms. As the “wannabe” label—used by nonwannabes but not by wannabes themselves—implies, her appropriation of nonwhite behavior is contested, exposing struggles over ethnic categories. Part of this struggle revolves around the wannabe’s enactment of a stereotypical presentation of Puerto Rican femininity, one that is simultaneously desired and degraded. This presentation feeds on the historical association of women of color with exotic sexuality (e.g., Mink 1990; Tolman 1996). The label “Puerto Rican wannabe” perpetuates the association of Puerto Rican femininity with behavior deemed morally undesirable by both whites and people of color. She rejects this label, positioning herself as racially authentic.

The wannabe continually slips back and forth between a chosen and an imposed identity. While she attempts to choose a more fluid racial identity, others hold her accountable to their more fixed interpretations of who she is. In this struggle, racial authenticity becomes a key category of expression and interpretation. Used to determine racial eligibility, the criteria for authenticity are necessarily slippery, molded to accommodate the ends of the person employing the criteria.

The Puerto Rican wannabe is symbolically loaded because she violates understandings about appropriate gender and (middle) classed behavior for white young women, understandings that are grounded in “proper” race-specific sexual conduct. In this article, I argue that interpretations of sexual behavior are critical to marking classed gender and racial boundaries. Puerto Rican wannabes delineate and efface ethnic boundaries through their sexual transgressions: Their preference for interracial dating and their “inappropriate,” nonwhite sexual self-presentations. In turn, nonwannabes, both girls and boys, use the wannabes’ sexual transgressions as a foil against which they construct and negotiate their own classed race and gender locations.

The class status of the wannabes is an open question. In the interviews I conducted, wannabes are alternatively imagined as fallen middle-class white girls or as poor white girls. Perhaps there are some of both. More likely, the inability to articulate their class location is a reflection of the larger American inability to articulate class. Regardless, imagined class matters. Class is used to validate or invalidate the wannabes’ claims to racial crossing and, in turn, to bolster each person’s own claims to moral, intellectual, or cultural superiority. The white youth in my study seem to inflexibly conflate class and race, assuming that whiteness means middle class-ness. The youth of color, on the other hand, are more open to the possibility of variation in the class location of the wannabes but assume that whiteness automatically confers a set of class privileges.

Although the wannabes' objective class location is ambiguous, these various narratives make clear that the Puerto Rican wannabe presentation is concomitantly a racial violation and a middle-class violation. Moreover, this violation is inherently gendered. Puerto Rican wannabes are not behaving like proper white middle-class young women. While these violations cross a number of behavioral categories, they are grounded most firmly in the wannabes' perceived rejection of appropriate white, middle-class, feminine sexual conduct, both through the choice of nonwhite dating partners and through the presentation of explicitly sexualized selves.

SEXUALITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

While gender and race continue to be popularly understood as biological categories, social constructionist arguments have gained a steady footing. This position holds that gender and race are flexible categories, able to shift and change form in different contexts and across time. Scholars have documented the contours of some of these metamorphoses, providing a clear picture of the effects of structural forces on the meanings and boundaries of gender and racial categories (e.g., Laqueur 1990; Nagel 1996; Omi and Winant 1986). But gender and race, as well as class, meanings are not just produced at the macro level; they are ongoing, local productions (Butler 1990; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Moreover, gender, race, and class categories intersect (Anderson and Hill Collins 1992), generating hierarchies both between and within categories.

Contemporary social, economic, and political changes make this a moment in which category negotiations are particularly intense. The mass influx of Latino and Asian immigrants, the increasing class heterogeneity of traditional raced groups, and the increase in the ethnically mixed population are forcing a reconfiguration of the U.S. racial structure. The presence of these groups complicates the straightforward deployment of race as a biological category, propelling both specific ethnic groups and U.S. society more generally to rethink the criteria for racial membership.

For many white, middle-class Americans, these changes have replaced overt racism with a logic of cultural inferiority that blames the disadvantaged socioeconomic position of many Blacks and Latinos on their behaviors (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997), allowing whites to perceive themselves as "color-blind" (Frankenberg 1993) even while they resuscitate racial stereotypes. At the same time, however, hip-hop culture has gained social ascendance. Emerging out of the Black urban experience of persistent socioeconomic and racial oppression, hip-hop music has captured the imaginations of white, middle-class, suburban kids (Kelley 1997; Rose 1994). The widespread consumption of hip-hop has given (mostly male) Blacks widespread cultural power in the form of coolness—even while white men capture most of its profit.

Latinos occupy the unstable borderland between Blackness and whiteness. As some middle-class Puerto Ricans draw a line around authentic island culture, pushing out hybrid cultural forms that integrate island elements with hip-hop culture, they make salient the importance of class to racial constructions. For example, New York-born Puerto Ricans, who are overwhelmingly poor, are often dismissed as inauthentic with the derisive label “Nuyorican” (Lao 1997; Negrón-Muntaner 1997). For some Puerto Ricans, this tension entails choosing between a “Spanish” identity and a Black identity. The Black identity carries more status in the currency of cool but often also requires the shifting of community allegiance.

Historical studies indicate the importance of sexuality as a mechanism for delineating racial membership in U.S. society. In their transition from Negro to (almost) white, for example, the Mississippi Chinese ended their sexual and marital relationships with Negro women, cutting off ties with both Negro kin and any Chinese who violated this proscription (Loewen 1971). Similarly, the Irish claim to whiteness depended on sexual separation from Blacks, enacted both by cutting off sexual relations with Blacks and by bringing their sexual behavior in line with Anglo standards (Roediger 1991).

The ethnic hierarchies created by sexuality are gendered. Historically and contemporarily, the assumption of insatiable, exotic sexuality—in contrast to the “pure” sexuality of white women—has been used to justify the degradation of women of color. At the same time, women of color have used their own sexual restraint to position themselves above “loose” white women (Espíritu 2001). As Nagel (2000, p. 109) argued, this use of sexual hierarchies “reinforce[s] and reestablish[es] sexual [and] gender hegemony.” By resurrecting the moral superiority of the virginal woman, ethnic communities place much of the responsibility for maintaining the community’s sexual integrity on women. For example, both Das Gupta (1997) and Espíritu (2001) documented the ways that women’s ethnic membership as Indians and as Filipinas in the United States is tied to a particular, restrictive performance of gender, enacted through sexual behavior aimed at intraethnic familial reproduction and devotion. These studies make clear that ethnic violations can occur both when a woman has sex across an ethnic border and when she has the wrong kind of sex.

My study combines the insights of these various strands of analysis. I use local youth and young adults to document empirically the ongoing production and negotiation of racial identities. I demonstrate the particular combinations of race, class, and gender boundary marking produced by and around the Puerto Rican wannabe. And I explore the critical role of sexuality in producing classed, raced, and gendered identities and boundaries.

THE STUDY

I began my study with an unfocused interview with Carrie, a white middle-class girl. It was in this interview that the concept of the wannabe emerged. I was

immediately fascinated, both by Carrie's palpable and uncharacteristic contempt and by the distinction she made between the behavior of the wannabes and my own relationship with a Puerto Rican man. My conversation with Carrie propelled my desire to explore the wannabes from a variety of perspectives. I thus pursued interviews with young people occupying a range of backgrounds. However, the constant policing of race, class, and gender borders made the interviews difficult to arrange. My original contacts—the white middle-class youth whose social locations were most like mine—were eager to talk to me about Puerto Rican wannabes, but youth of color were reluctant to talk to me at all. To them, I learned, I was “that (white) lady.” I was able to secure interviews when the initial contact was made through a Puerto Rican: My boyfriend or one of my friends. Once they established my legitimacy, I successfully attained trust and rapport with my informants; indeed, they were frequently delighted to educate me on both their terminology (e.g., “kicking it”) and their dating norms. These interviews, moreover, tended to generate at least one more contact. My luck was not so good with wannabes themselves, whose responses to my conversational attempts ranged from cordially cold to rude. Six months after my first attempt to talk to a wannabe, I convinced one to talk to me. She, in turn, introduced me to the other two wannabes in this study.

The sample that I compiled, then, is a convenience sample. At the time of the study, my informants ranged from 14-year-old ninth graders to 22-year-olds. Young people are a useful group for this study for a number of reasons. First, they are in a transitory life stage popularly associated with identity phases. Their identity experiments are less directly encumbered by concerns about career or family formation. The intensity of their identity negotiations thus provides rich material for understanding the construction of gender, race, and class. Second, the wannabe is a phenomenon of young people, emerging in part out of the recent extension of hip-hop to suburban youth culture. When I mention the wannabe to young people, I do not need to explain her the way I must to older adults. For all the participants in the study, the wannabe is a salient symbol of transgression.

I conducted 21 formal interviews (and multiple casual conversations) with adolescents and young adults representing a wide range of race, gender, and class positions (see Table 1). Interviewees determined their own racial/ethnic categorization. I determined class by parental occupation and residential location. I designated class as ambiguous when class markers conflicted. For example, Mani's mother is low income, but his father and stepfather (with whom he lived for a number of years) are middle class. Although the formal interviews took place at prearranged times and places, they were really informal conversations, loosely guided topically by me but given specific form by the participants. On average, those conversations lasted an hour and a half, but several lasted much longer, and I had multiple interviews with three of my contacts. I taped and transcribed interviews and recorded field notes as soon as possible after casual conversations.

I conducted my research in Amherst and Northampton, two college towns in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. The towns and cities in the valley seep into each other; thus, the social circles I investigated cross town borders, flowing

TABLE 1: Characteristics of Sample Population

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>Age</i>
Bryan	Male	White	Middle	18
Carrie	Female	White	Middle	16
Claudia	Female	Puerto Rican	Low Income	15
Courtney	Female	White	Middle	16
Danielle	Female	White	Middle	17
Eric	Male	White	Middle	17
Hadley	Male	Black	Middle	21
Imani	Female	Black	Low Income	14
Jaclyn	Female	White wannabe	Low Income	22
Jennifer	Female	Black	Low Income	14
Jose	Male	Puerto Rican	Low Income	17
Kelli	Female	White wannabe	Ambiguous	22
Laura	Female	White	Middle	17
Maddie	Female	White	Middle	15
Mani	Male	Puerto Rican	Ambiguous	21
Mariella	Female	Puerto Rican	Middle	15
Mark	Male	White	Middle	18
Nia	Female	"Brown"	Low Income	14
Nora	Female	Puerto Rican/White	Low Income	14
Rafi	Male	Puerto Rican	Low Income	21
Shari	Female	White wannabe	Middle	22

between Northampton and Amherst and pushing outward into, and pulling in from, the neighboring cities of Holyoke and Springfield. In Amherst and Northampton, gentrification, rising housing costs, and a declining visible white working-class culture abet the appearance of widespread affluence. The increasing invisibility of economic hardship in Amherst and Northampton pushes low-income kids to look to the broader community for both a model of low-income membership and validation of their relative poverty. In Amherst and Northampton, as well as Holyoke and Springfield, Puerto Rican median household income is well below that of both whites and Blacks. Objectively the most impoverished group in the area, Puerto Ricans are also the symbol of poverty. Thus, interpretations of Puerto Rican culture and low-income culture intertwine: To be poor is to be Puerto Rican.

WHITE MIDDLE-CLASS YOUTH: "AND THEN THERE'S THOSE 'OTHER' GIRLS"

The stories white middle-class girls and boys tell about Puerto Rican wannabes are racialized tales of good (white) girls gone bad. Puerto Rican wannabes used to be proper white middle-class girls, and then they changed. Now they are too loud, too tough, and "too proud of their sexuality." At once victims and bitches, the

wannabes are scrutinized by the white middle-class girls I interviewed with both concern and contempt. Ironically, the strands of concern, rooted in white middle-class feminist discourse, strip the wannabes of agency, presenting them as insecure dupes, exploited by their Puerto Rican boyfriends. The strands of anger, on the other hand, suggest that the wannabes deliberately reject the behaviors of white middle-class femininity. The white middle-class boys in my study add the desire to “save [the wannabes] from themselves” to the girls’ mix of concern and contempt.

By constructing tales of fallen white middle-class girls, these young people point to the intersection of class, ethnicity, and gender. Carrie describes wannabes as “obnoxious, yell[ing] obscene things.” Laura paints a more detailed portrait: “Wannabes are so fucking annoying, loud, obnoxious, bitchy, always fighting— ‘oh, I’ll kick your ass.’ ” They “hate school,” skipping classes and “com[ing] across as academically ignorant because of the way they speak” (the Puerto Rican version of Ebonics) and smoking Newports (a brand of cigarettes associated with people of color) in the bathroom at school. Laura sees this “fuck the world attitude” as a show. She describes wannabes as “loving the image.” “Maybe they do come from really good middle-American homes and don’t like that because that’s not dramatic enough or something.” She presents the wannabes as having diverged from an otherwise uncluttered path to college and successful white womanhood.

Bryan tells a more specific transformation tale about Kim—“the biggest Puerto Rican wannabe in [Northampton High] School.” Kim “was the whitest white girl . . . rich as hell, nice cashmere clothes, almost a dork.” Now she’s living with her Puerto Rican boyfriend, seven months pregnant, dealing cocaine and marijuana, and “has about one thousand dollars worth of gold on her body.” Kim’s style shift crystallizes the symbolism of clothes. While both cashmere clothes and gold jewelry demonstrate consumption, cashmere clothes are associated with taste and restraint (both sexual, because cashmere is unrevealing, and financial, because cashmere is a quality investment), while the gold jewelry is linked to the stereotypically flashy, unwise spending of the poor. Giving up cashmere in favor of gold symbolizes Kim’s rejection of her parents’ money, the rejection of their cultural capital, and the rejection of white male approval.

In all the white youth versions of the wannabes’ transformation, the biggest transgressions involve sex. Eric explains that wannabes change the “way they speak, think, and act,” “warping their style” and “who they are” to “attract a certain kind of guy.” They thus have sex with the wrong kind of guys (“older guys who appear to be drug dealers,” according to Carrie) and have sex in the wrong way (“unprotected sex with [their] boyfriend[s] and risk pregnancy because [they] don’t give a shit,” according to Laura). Moreover, they do not hide their interest in sex or tone down their own sexualized self-presentations. Instead, they openly grind (rub their pelvises into their partners’ pelvises) at school dances, dress in tight clothes, and wear dark makeup.

The white middle-class girls I interviewed interpret this shocking display of sexuality as both victimization and deviance. On one hand, the wannabes are victims of sexually predatory and emotionally abusive Puerto Rican boys who take advantage

of their insecurities. Repeatedly describing wannabes as “insecure” and “lost,” Courtney contends that they need “something to fit into,” and so they become “wrapped up” in their Puerto Rican boyfriends. On the other hand, they are openly violating race and gender rules for sexual behavior. Wannabes are “seen as more sexual than other *white* girls. They’re more open—they talk about it. They’re proud. . . . They seem like *typical* boys—sex is an accomplishment” (emphasis added).

Frequently, the strands entangle in the story, tying victimization and deviance into a morally suspect knot, as in Courtney’s description of the wannabes’ relationships. The Puerto Rican boyfriends “make [the wannabes] feel good about themselves” but not because they respect them. Instead, they make them “feel wanted and loved” by “getting mad at the girls for talking to other guys.” Not only are they “seen as becoming their boyfriends,” Laura contends, but “they let guys talk them into whatever they want them to do,” which includes unwanted sex and unsafe sex. Wannabes “have sex with boys to make them happy.” “Puerto Rican guys don’t want to have safe sex ever. Two girls got pregnant and had abortions.”

The braid these girls weave displaces the threat of sexual victimization onto the wannabes. By alternatively seeing the wannabes as sexual deviants and as victims of a particular (race-, class-, and age-coded) kind of man, these girls draw a net of safety around themselves: It will not happen to us because we know better. They simultaneously draw on both liberal feminist precepts of adolescent girls’ self-actualization and traditional understandings of white middle-class girls’ sexual restraint to position themselves as morally and politically superior and as sexually safer.

The middle-class white boys I interviewed have a different relationship to the wannabes’ sexuality. Attracted to the exotic hypersexuality they associate with the Puerto Rican wannabes, these boys use redemption narratives to justify their sexual pursuit. They present it as their responsibility to try to “save [the wannabes] from themselves.” According to Eric, the conversion to the “gangster lifestyle” is a “cry for help.” The “tough girl thing,” he tells me, is attractive to some white boys who “think they can be revolutionary; they’re out to break the girl, break some secret code or some such shit.” Eric admits to being attracted to tough girls himself when they show “they have a weakness in them.”

Bryan too is attracted to Kim, despite (or because of) her flagrant sexual violations. He first cheated on his ex-girlfriend with her and then went on a personal crusade “to get her back” while she was hospitalized after an illegal abortion. Kim “didn’t want to come back.” But Bryan’s friend Mark, another Northampton senior, did redeem his girlfriend Julie from wannabehood. Mark clearly sees himself as a good influence in white middle-class terms.

She was considered a bad—you know—she snuck out of her house to go to [a roller skating rink]. . . . She knew she was headed in the wrong direction and hanging out in the wrong crowd. She was still getting As, so it wasn’t totally ruining her life.

These kids depend on racist tropes of Puerto Rican femininity and masculinity to make sense of the wannabes' behavior and to give emotional weight to their concerns. The boys in my study more directly condemn the wannabes for what they see as a perplexing choice of a lesser status. "If you're Puerto Rican," Bryan says, "you're already on a lower [level], not only to teachers but to peers." These girls, on the other hand, want to see themselves as colorblind, explaining that they "hate how [they are] sucked into stereotyping." Laura, in particular, pushes the violation of liberal middle-class racial codes onto the wannabes. "Wannabes," she complains,

Are taking the stereotype of Puerto Ricans and making it something they want to be. They're trying to be something they're not. . . . They seem so ignorant about what it means to be Puerto Rican, what the group really is. . . . People like that make it hard because they glorify these stereotypes by dressing up like that, and that makes me even more mad.

Explicitly constructing themselves in opposition to the wannabes, these girls situate themselves as "together," authentic white girls making individual choices. Indeed, in a historical period characterized by widespread unemployment, increasing poverty, rising numbers of single-parent families, and the persistence of gender discrimination, it is perhaps important for these girls to see themselves as psychologically advantaged, as emerging strong and intact from the minefield of female adolescence, as making the right choices, as having the self-esteem and integrity required for career and financial success. At the same time, this construction veils both the race and the class advantages that allow them to see themselves as authentic individuals and the future limitations to individual success they are likely to experience as women. Moreover, it perpetuates a narrow vision of proper sexual conduct for girls.

These boys' comments similarly assume that white kids, regardless of economic circumstance or of gender, have equal access to the privilege of whiteness. Moreover, the boys' deployment of the romantic hero discourse signals the persistence of racial and gender hierarchies. They both desire the exotic and dangerous wannabes and want to tame them. The wannabes offer the boys a chance to reassert their gender and racial dominance as protectors.

**YOUTH OF COLOR:
"DON'T THINK JUST BECAUSE YOU KNOW SPANISH
YOU'RE ALREADY PUERTO RICAN"**

Claudia and Imani, low-income; Puerto Rican and Black, respectively; ninth-grade girls at Amherst High School, say that white girls hope that by hanging out with Puerto Rican and Black people, some of their coolness will rub off on them. They speak Spanish, copy clothing and hairstyles, try to act tough—all to try to fit in. But it does not work. They try too hard and it backfires. Imani explains,

They're trying to be down, and it's just like they try to be around you so much that it irritates you. 'Cause it's just not them. For them to be Puerto Rican, you know what I'm saying? You can be friends, but for them to try so hard, it's just not working for them because they're taking it too far.

Claudia complains most vehemently about Candy, who has nicknamed herself "Miss Puertorriqueña," and Tina, who insists on speaking Spanish even when Claudia initiates a conversation in English:

She was like getting on my nerves all the time. . . . I'm all the time talking to her in English, and she would just bust out talking to me in Spanish and things like that, and she just started getting too much into my business, and I was just like, yo, I need to push this to the side, so she got kicked to the side.

Similarly, Nia, a low-income, self-identified "Brown" (her mother is white; her father is Black) Amherst 10th-grader, expresses disgust with white girls who tout symbols of Puerto Rican or Black ethnic pride (e.g., wearing a Puerto Rican flag): "Why are you trying to be down with a culture that's not yours?"

The boys of color I interviewed weave an account that sounds very much like the stories told by the girls. According to Rafi, a Puerto Rican on the edge of the Amherst gangster scene, wannabes are "people with no identity who want to adapt something they think is cool." Wannabes may think they are "down," but listening to hip-hop, smoking "blunts" (marijuana rolled in cigar wrappers), and drinking "forties" (40-ounce cans of malt liquor marketed to and associated with poor Blacks) does not make them any less white. So Rafi rhetorically asks them, "Why don't you act like who you really are?"

The wannabes are dismissed alternatively on biological and cultural grounds. They are condemned both for not acting white and for performing Puerto Ricanness inadequately. As Rafi says,

[Wannabes think that by] acting Puerto Rican . . . they can pretty much just look down on people. . . . More of an attitude they never had, and they somehow fucking changed, and they think they're bad and they want to fight. *Because she's white and she acts like that, people look down on her. That's the only reason* (emphasis added).

But while Rafi trivializes the wannabes' toughness because he sees it as racially inauthentic, Claudia scoffs at the wannabes' passivity. "[Tina] got beat up by a Puerto Rican, and she let the girl beat her up, and Puerto Ricans don't let nobody just beat them up." Candy's unwillingness to spar verbally with Claudia provokes a similar response: "Us Puerto Ricans, we don't shut up by nobody, you know what I'm saying? You dis us, we'll dis you right back and things like that. With [Candy], she'll stay quiet." Nia, too, contends that the wannabes are not "as hard [tough] as they think they are."

To the kids of color, the wannabes' behavior is more than just inauthentic: It is embarrassing. "They're like a disgrace to [Puerto Rican] culture or something," Nia

comments. Hadley, who is Black, similarly explains, "They're acting all ghetto. They're not acting like us and participating in the mainstream lifestyle. And it gives the connotation that being Puerto Rican is being ghetto." Rafi adds, "It's fucked up because it gives us a bad image."

By participating in behaviors associated with the urban poor and calling them Puerto Rican, the wannabes perpetuate negative stereotypes about people of color. Moreover, wannabes are seen as sacrificing white privilege in favor of Puerto Rican coolness. This trade is degrading because it implies that Puerto Ricans and Blacks devalue ambition and mainstream socioeconomic success, disparaging the efforts of those Puerto Ricans and Blacks who seek upward mobility. Thus, at least for these boys of color, white people are occasionally allowed to cross if they "do school and everything," that is, if they do not throw away the (classed) resources of whiteness by "try[ing] too hard."

Underlying all of these accounts is anxiety over racial solidarity. The symbol of Black and Puerto Rican pride most frequently invoked by these kids is coolness. The more relaxed attitude associated with "chillin'" and the mass popularity of Black and Puerto Rican cultural forms allow these youth of color to think of themselves as more interesting, as more desirable, or as having more fun than white youth. In the absence of traditional routes to socioeconomic success, coolness provides both an alternative definition of success and a point of ethnic pride around which solidarity can be built. Coolness is thus both a psychological and a political resource.

To maintain the boundaries of coolness, girls and boys of color struggle with the meaning of race, concurrently invoking biological and cultural definitions. This struggle is most visible in the tension between race and class, as they sometimes contest the association of Puerto Ricans and Blacks with ghetto behavior, while they also frequently use ghetto behavior as a symbol of Puerto Rican and Black ethnicity. These complicated constructions reflect a more widespread anxiety about personal and collective strategies for success. Various recognizing the constraints on their opportunities, these kids develop multiple alliances, pushing for solidarity while sometimes seeking status through individual and collective differentiation. They thus employ "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, cited in Hall 1992) to claim the distinctiveness and exclusivity of their cultural space while they also make room for their own exceptionality (and thus chances of individual upward mobility) by challenging the biological bases of race.

While the youth of color invoke similar critiques of the wannabes' consumption of Black and Puerto Rican culture, the accounts diverge around the issue of sexuality. For the girls of color, stories of the wannabes' improper sexual behavior are the chief medium through which they express both derision and embarrassment. Nia, in particular, castigates the wannabes as sluts: "You hear all the rumors and you know they're true because you see all the hickeys and stuff." "Guys talk about all the things she's done with them—willingly." "They wear all these hootchy mama [slutty] things." "They're just walking down with their five kids and their attitude—makes them look low class, like trash."

Nia's indictment depicts the mutual constitution of ethnicity, class, and gender. Her description of Christine, a wannabe, highlights this interrelationship:

She's always been a little Betty Boop or something. . . . Then she started sleeping around with all these guys. She thought she was pregnant this year. Her voice is so annoying. [I] don't look at her when she's talking—speaking Ebonics and stuff. All ghetto. . . . I hate her walk—it's nasty. She sticks her chest out, holds her hands out, and she has an attitude on her face, like she's all tough or something.

Rejecting the physical presentation and restrained sexuality associated with middle-class white femininity, Christine adopts a class- and gender-specific Puerto Rican-ness or Blackness. Nia differentiates her own brownness from Christine's ghetto attitude and flamboyant sexuality. Her disgust and anger stem, in part, from her recognition that Christine's race-marked behavior limits Nia's ability to submerge her own stigmatized ethnic and class position.

Like Nia, Claudia and Imani use sexual behavior to draw a boundary between themselves and the wannabes. Tina, they tell me, does not know the rules of the Puerto Rican and Black dating game. She "gives it up too soon," talks to too many boys, and does not wait for a commitment (in the form of being asked out) before she acts on her physical desire. "She's a fool. . . . That's what makes people talk junk about her," Claudia says; "all the boys want her for is just that, you know." While Claudia and Imani call Tina a fool for not knowing the game, Claudia ridicules Candy for knowing it too well. "She tries to be a player, like most Puerto Ricans are players, and she's just like trying to play them or whatever." Imani and Claudia use their own relative sexual restraint to position themselves as more socially skilled, and thus more authentically Puerto Rican, than are Tina and Candy.

At the same time, this line allows the girls to construct themselves as both good and smart in opposition to the feminine transgressions of the wannabes. Tina is a "fool" who gets "used" because she is too easy. Candy "tries to be a player," but Claudia "ain't." Imani and Claudia play the game right; they both capitalize on whatever their (authentic) ethnicity can provide them with (coolness, pride) and maintain whatever gendered power they can within their social network (by playing the boys right so they do not get used, for example). Nia also emphasizes the authenticity of her Brownness by distinguishing herself both from the false pride (attitude) and hootchy behavior of wannabes and (more ambivalently) from the ghetto preoccupations of other kids of color. These girls of color, then, both concretely and symbolically reject the wannabes' attempts at solidarity.

The boys share the girls' contempt with the girls over the wannabes' perceived unrestrained sexuality. However, unlike the girls, who are often in sexual competition with the wannabes, many of the boys establish sexual and romantic relationships with them. The boys compensate for this possible cross-racial alliance by using sexuality to racially differentiate wannabes and girls of color. This strategy allows boys of color to preserve both their solidarity with girls of color and their sexual access to wannabes.

These boys portray wannabes as a sexual opportunity to be exploited but not taken seriously. "People say they're easy," Rafi tells me,

And they [Puerto Rican and Black boys] can get away with a lot more stuff, like fucking around. [White girls] are more naïve than other girls. They usually put up with a lot more stuff. People call them suckers half the time.

By seeing wannabes as offering easy sexual access without commitment, boys of color can use them to gain status in their own social networks. Mani, another Amherst Puerto Rican, explains that sex with Puerto Rican girls both compromises the girls' purity and ensnares the boys in obligatory relationships. In contrast, sex with wannabes provides the boys with a chance to prove their masculinity (interpreted as virility and promiscuity) without tarnishing girls of color.

The appeal of this possibility rests on, perpetuates, and reconstructs a double standard. First, the equation of masculinity with sexual prowess and femininity with sexual restraint makes the boys' sexual conquests status producing in the first place. It also provides the impetus to preserve the sexual virtue of Puerto Rican and Black girls. These behaviors then reinvigorate the sexual line that divides "proper" boys from "proper" girls. The second double standard (bad girls do and good girls do not) bolsters and is bolstered by the drive to keep girls of color pure. But by having sex with the wannabes instead, the boys of color also invert the racial hierarchy that is inscribed on the madonna/whore dichotomy. Historically, white men have preserved the virtue of white women by using women of color sexually. This practice, in addition, served as both a bodily reminder of racial subordination and a justification of that subordination by constructing women of color as sexually other. By using wannabes as disposable, exploitable sexual objects, boys of color turn white girls into whores the same way white men have turned women of color into whores. Blackness and Puerto Rican-ness triumph over whiteness, but this reversal of the racial hierarchy depends on the maintenance of a gender hierarchy that positions men over women and good women over bad women. To participate in this racial triumph, then, girls of color must buy into their own sexual subordination.

Dismissing the wannabes as fake and untrustworthy exonerates the young men's exploitative treatment of them. It also maintains the symbolic transposition of the hierarchy between (white) wannabes and girls of color, whose (perhaps similar) behavior is read as racially consistent and thus not fake, leaving solidarity between boys and girls of color at least partially intact. (It is important to remember that this work deals with the construction of meaning, not with actual behavior. Thus, I am not arguing here that boys of color actually treat girls of color in a nonexploitative fashion, only that they construct them as being both sexually and racially different from the wannabes). At the same time, this construction leaves little room for a boy of color to take a wannabe seriously if he wants to. Hadley's jokes about Rafi's wannabe ex-girlfriends make salient this limitation. The policing of this norm both limits the wannabes' ability to claim Puerto Rican-ness through interracial dating and illustrates the strength of their threat.

**PUERTO RICAN WANNABES:
“THERE’S A LOT OF WHITE GIRLS
WHO GIVE SOME WHITE GIRLS A BAD NAME”**

Jaclyn prides herself on her ability to pass as Puerto Rican, but she rejects and resents the label “Puerto Rican wannabe,” describing herself instead as someone who “dates interracially” as a “lifestyle.” In addition to her highly stylized self-presentation designed to attract men of color, Jaclyn, now 22, structures her social life so that most of the men she meets are Black or Latino. She attends Black fraternity parties at a nearby university, Black and Latino nightclubs in Springfield and Boston, and basketball games at the park where the people of color hang out.

Jaclyn initially naturalizes her attraction to Black men, arguing that people are just attracted to who they are attracted to. Her argument about the naturalness of her dating choices is repeated by Kelli and Shari. Kelli contends that she is “more comfortable” in majority Black settings, while Shari says, “That’s what I’m attracted to, you know. I think I just like their skin.” Both Kelli and Shari, like Jaclyn, suggest that they have more in common with Black and Puerto Rican men because of their love for hip-hop music.

Jaclyn expands this analysis, however, building an explanation of her dating pattern that rests not only on shared interests but also on shared experiences.

I mean, dating Black men is not this fad that a lot of people think it is; you know a lot of people think it’s about being cool and about being down and because hip-hop is considered cool that everybody wants to do it. It’s not about that. At all. It’s about experiences and understanding and having different perspective and really being able to passionately feel with somebody else because you have felt similar things. . . . Like poverty. Like prejudice—because I’m a woman.

By claiming a shared experience of oppression, Jaclyn’s justification of her involvement with Black men replicates the distinctions between authentic and inauthentic participation in Black culture made by the youth of color. She uses her class disadvantage to locate herself organically in the community.

Kelli and Shari advance similar, if less elaborate and less explicitly class-based, arguments. Kelli contends that as an Amherst High School athlete, she was a member of the “popular group,” a group comprising mostly Black kids. And Shari claims that her friends are primarily Puerto Ricans because those are the people she used to work with. While Kelli suggests a natural fit because of her athleticism, however, Shari uniquely portrays herself as having changed, as having integrated into her existing environment by adopting a convincing Puerto Rican accent (although she does not speak Spanish), by learning to cook Puerto Rican food, and by becoming “more feminine.” Shari’s transformation is dramatized by her move from racially homogeneous New Hampshire to the Valley and by her “biracial” infant, whose father is Puerto Rican.

While these women’s accounts share similar elements, the women do not claim alliances with each other. Indeed, Jaclyn’s strategy depends on distancing herself

from other, “embarrassing” white women. Like the nonwannabe girls in the study, she uses the trope, but not the label, of the wannabe as a foil against which she positions herself as authentic and deserving: Unlike other white women who date Black men just to be rebellious, she is genuinely concerned with racial oppression and Black culture. Unlike other white women who “try too hard,” exaggerating symbols of hip-hop culture and coming across as fake, she exhibits only those aspects of hip-hop culture that come naturally to her. And unlike other white women who date and sleep with any Black men who come their way, she is “not easy,” shelving her sexual desire until she feels she has earned the respect of her partner.

Jaclyn’s stories echo the contempt of both the middle-class white girls and the girls of color, but their tone is more intimate. These are stories told about women who are ostensibly her friends. These are stories told not about the other but about women who are like her, about women she tries to turn into the other as a means of erasing her own otherness.

At our first, six-hour meeting, Jaclyn gossiped about Kelli, with whom she and I had just had dinner, and with whom she has an on-again/off-again friendship. The two women engage with each other with warmth and humor. Indeed, Jaclyn invited Kelli to join us for dinner on the basis of their social similarities. Yet Jaclyn quickly indicates that she perceives their similarities to be merely superficial. Unlike her own genuine location in the Black and Latino subculture, Kelli is “fake.” As the three of us were talking, for example, Jaclyn pointed out to me how Kelli’s accent shifted when she began talking on the phone to her Black friends. Kelli “tries too hard.” To further illustrate this point, Jaclyn tells a story about a recent dinner the women had with two semiprofessional basketball players:

And Andrew goes, “Where are you from?” and she goes, “Amherst.” He goes, “Oh, no, before that,” and he said, “Like from the South somewhere,” and she’s like—you know she got really offended because you could tell it was so fake and he was trying to tell her it was fake without saying it—you know, just blunt and right out, “Hey, you’re really fake,” and uh, it was just really bothering me.

Kelli’s behavior calls attention to her position as a racial outsider, as a white woman in a Black social world, and thus, by extension, also highlights Jaclyn’s whiteness. Kelli is “embarrassing” not because she exaggerates racial stereotypes, as the youth of color suggest, but because her exaggeration reminds people that she is performing.

Jaclyn is additionally embarrassed by Kelli’s too open display of sexual desire. As she says, “There’s a lot of white girls [who] give some white girls a bad name, and it’s true. Because Black men think that white girls are easy.”

The way Kelli carries herself if she drinks too much in a club is extremely humiliating. And they all look at her like that horny, easy white girl. And I’m there with her. And I’m there *with* her, you know.

Like the Filipina women in Espiritu's (2001) study, Jaclyn separates herself from the improper sexuality associated with white women to establish her (cross-)ethnic legitimacy.

Jaclyn's strategy is multifaceted. Rather than collapsing the boundaries between racial categories, Jaclyn uses her class location to naturalize her location on the Black and Latino side of the boundary while concurrently using her behavior to suggest that she has earned her status as a racial insider. Because she relies on distancing herself from the "humiliating" behavior of other white girls, Jaclyn necessarily resurrects the racial boundary. She thus becomes an exceptional case, allowed to cross because of her (self-described) exemplary (and thus unfake) behavior.

Jaclyn's strategy is a sensible response to limited mobility. Without the educational opportunities and the cultural capital of the white middle class, Jaclyn has little chance of being a successful participant in white middle-class culture. Skilled in the Black and Puerto Rican culture she grew up around, she uses her personal resources (intelligence, beauty, assertiveness) to claim a place in it. Her efforts provide her with the status of notoriety, of desirability, of coolness, but these benefits incur considerable costs.

Jaclyn's legitimacy in the Black/Latino subculture depends on her ability to attract Black and Puerto Rican men both as sexual partners and as potential mates. The first task requires physical labor, the second, emotional labor. Her physical attractiveness is time consuming and expensive. Moreover, her strategy of neutralizing her white otherness forces her to play the madonna/whore card: Jaclyn puts considerable effort into managing her sexual reputation, by postponing her own sexual satisfaction and limiting interactions between former and current sexual or romantic partners and by separating herself from embarrassing, "easy," white women. For Jaclyn, restrained sexuality is a means of naturalizing her (cross-) racial membership. She uses her emotional investment in Black and Puerto Rican men to position herself as a logical member of her community. By espousing the conflation of emotional intimacy and sexuality, she adds weight to her interracial relationships. But her commitment to racial crossing comes at the expense of her friendships with other wannabes. Over time, not surprisingly, her stories reveal a pattern of disrupted and competitive friendships—a pattern that is both destabilizing and isolating.

CONCLUSION

The contentions that race, class, and gender are both performative and intersecting are by now staples of feminist work. This study gives empirical flesh to these theories by using the spectacle of the Puerto Rican wannabe to demonstrate the tense coproduction of race, gender, and class. As the "wannabe" label implies, her acquisition of a transgressive racial identity is contested; it is validated, repudiated, and reshaped through an ongoing process of negotiation between herself and her

peers. This negotiation process is critical to the individual success of the wannabes' strategy as well as to its political impact.

The wannabe's identity production uses gender and class performances to shift the wannabe's racial location. This process makes clear that while gender, race, and class are always coconstructed, they are not constructed in equivalent ways. In this case, the salience of racial language makes race the category of acknowledged negotiation. But the explicit transgression of racial categories does not mean that they are the only ones at stake. Indeed, profound class anxiety pervades this study but is displaced onto race; outrage over racial violations almost always expresses alarm about what the wannabe's strategy means for long-term class mobility.

Gender operates differently from either race or class. The wannabe manipulates her gender performance as a means of crossing racial boundaries. This strategy pushes against the constraints of white girlhood, giving her access to behaviors and a pool of potential sexual partners she was disallowed as a (proper) white girl. Her performance and its interpretations are then used to shuffle racialized femininities. However, this shuffling of gender meanings operates within an unacknowledged (and thus unchallenged) system of dichotomous, heterosexual gender identities and thus reinforces gender boundaries. Moreover, even the struggles over gender meanings involve differently racialized girls' laying claim to conventional notions of privileged femininity rather than challenges to femininity's narrow and restrictive definition.

The wannabes' access to cross-racial membership is predicated on their subscription to restrained heterosexuality. And they are not alone. In this study, sexual restraint is the primary criterion for evaluating feminine performance in every racial category. Girls' ability to access stable racial identities rests on the perception of their sexuality as properly contained. Girls who violate (or are perceived to violate) the convention of restrained sexuality are deraced, pushed out of whiteness but unaccepted by Blackness, Puerto Rican-ness, or (at least some of) their fellow wannabes. While wannabehood does allow white girls to shift their pool of potential sexual partners, then, it does not open up "the discourse of desire" (Fine 1988) for wannabes or for other girls. This particular use of sexuality to establish racial membership and to shape racial identities leaves women disempowered in heterosexual relationships and prevents girls from establishing sexual agency. Whether girls are able to create spaces that allow unrestricted sexual desire is an open question.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) theorizes that cross-gender performances destabilize dichotomous gender categories by exposing the performativity of gender. Like the drag queen, the Puerto Rican wannabe exposes the performativity of categories through her spectacle. As Butler's argument suggests, her performance destabilizes racial categories, adding elasticity to their boundaries and molding their content. Here, however, it is racial rather than gender categories that are being destabilized. Moreover, that racial destabilization rests on stable heteronormative and hierarchical gender categories. In the case of the wannabe, then, the radical potential of racial destabilization is blunted by its reinscription of inequality

between men and women as well as between women. As one of many contemporary spectacles, the Puerto Rican wannabe gives us insight into one way race, gender, and class categories construct each other. The critical insight is not that boundaries are in flux but rather that fluctuations on one boundary construct and deconstruct other boundaries. The task ahead, then, is to specify the variety of circumstances in which categories are used to stabilize and destabilize each other.

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Amy C. Wilkins is a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. Her dissertation, from which this article is drawn, is a study of the uses of sexuality in the formation of racial, gender, and class identities in three youth cultures: Puerto Rican wannabes, Goths, and evangelical Christians.