

Fucked

“Okay, next up is LaTonya. Show some love, y’all. Give it up for LaTonya.” The MC stepped back and handed the microphone to LaTonya.

LaTonya turned to put the mic on the stand and turned back to face the small crowd with her hands on her hips. “Hello y’all, how you doing?” Several “Goods” and “All right, nows” echoed through the audience of spoken-word artists and enthusiasts.

“My poem is called ‘He Fucked Me.’” LaTonya took a couple of steps forward as she spoke the title.

From the back of the room a female voice let out a slightly embarrassed “oop,” and laughter rippled across the room.

In a strong, clear voice LaTonya recited her poem:

He fucked me

Oh, yes—He fucked me

He fucked me and it was good

He fucked me all night long, He fucked me hard and strong

And—it was good

He licked me from head to toe and my body was screamin’

out for mo’

Our bodies were locked together in love, lust, and sweat

Oh my Lord he fucked me and I never been so wet

He fucked, He fucked, He fucked me and then we passed out asleep
I woke up the next day and said, this one I just might keep.

LaTonya paused after the last line of her poem and dramatically walked in a small circle around the stage. She was seven months pregnant, and her protruding belly seemed to carve out the space before she walked through it. There was some clapping and a low buzz in the crowd, as people whispered and looked to each other for some sign of how to respond appropriately. LaTonya now had her back to the audience. We all quieted down while we watched to see what she was about to do. She bent over, sticking her butt out toward the audience. Crystal, sitting to next to me, buried her head in my shoulder and said, "Oh, no, she's not. Please tell me she ain't about to . . ." But she did. LaTonya put her hands to her knees and started moving her backside in a dance called the booty clap.¹ She rolled her shoulder back in the same rhythm as her backside was moving, turned her head to look back at the audience, and smiled.

"I guess that was supposed to be her little dance to bring the poem to life?" Crystal said, still refusing to look at the stage. She covered her eyes with her hands and put her head down on the table.

"See, this is why you can't take shelter girls nowhere," Rachel was talking to Lynnette and trying not to laugh.

Lynnette, always calm and thoughtful, winked at me from across the café table but said nothing. When LaTonya returned to her seat at the table, Lynnette said, "Okay, girl. I liked your confidence up there. You are a natural."

Rachel, playing instigator, said, "What'd you think, Ms. Aimee? How would you rate that performance?"

"LaT, you are fearless. I'm just relieved that you didn't go into labor on stage." I had already read LaT's poem and knew that she was planning to read it at poetry night. The booty clap dance, however, was a surprise ending.

On certain Friday nights when there were three resident advisors (RAs) on duty, Lynnette and I would take a group of girls down to the Brown Bean café for open mic night. Most of the girls would already be out of the shelter, getting a jump on their weekend activities, so two RAs could easily hold down the fort. Before making our way to the Brown Bean, we would usually stop by Borders to browse the books, get ice cream, and walk around downtown. Usually three to five girls would join us, even though they would all claim to have big plans for Friday night. When the boyfriend, girlfriend,

or unreliable family member forgot them, they ended up in the Give Girls a Chance (GGC) van with us. Lynnette, the girls, and I liked listening to the original poetry and rating the singers and comedians.

Two weeks prior to LaT's performance, the girls had been beside themselves after a particularly handsome Black man in his mid-twenties read a poem about making love to his girlfriend. The poem was full of metaphoric references to nature and food and painted a very saccharine portrait of sex. On the way home the girls were still swooning. They reread his verses that they had copied down in their pocket notebooks, pretending to woo each other. LaTonya, however, did not seem so impressed and let everybody know that she felt his performance was fake and not masculine enough for her. "Now you know he ain't talking that shit when it is really time to throw down—'your eyes are like deep pools,' and what not and whatever. I bet he is at home right now just straight up fuckin' somebody."

The other girls in the van, including Janice, Rachel, and Crystal, laughed LaTonya off and kept on with their romantic rereadings. So LaTonya turned her attention to me and Lynnette. "Y'all think I can get on the mic next time? I want to read the real version. Let 'em know what is really up."

Rachel, the shelter's resident poet, read one of her poems each time we went to the Brown Bean, and a few of the other residents had read once or twice. The hope was that the girls who wanted to read would feel comfortable sharing their work and begin to consider themselves on the same plane as the spoken-word artists they admired. Because the Fresh Start girls were a bit younger than the average person who took the mic, they were always well received and encouraged throughout their reading. As soon as we walked through the door, Big Mike, the café manager, always greeted us the same way: "Hello, little sisters."

"Of course you can read," Lynnette said. "I been dying to hear you share some wisdom. What you think you going to call your piece?"

"He Fucked Me," LaTonya said, without missing a beat.

The events in this chapter complicate the more prevalent discourses employed to talk about Black women as gendered bodies and sexual actors. Discussions of gender conformity and disruption and of expressions of sexual pleasure and desire in enduring contexts of violence and exploitation rarely include how these critical inquiries differ for Black girls and young women. The young women at Fresh Start wrestle with the ability to deliberately act in their own bodies in ways that honor their wants and needs beyond sexual fulfillment or the most efficacious presentations of

self. The stories here combine questions of sexuality, sexual preference, gendered identity, and gender performance not to conflate them but to highlight the ways in which Black girls most frequently attain legibility and, therefore, arouse concern. In a published roundtable discussion on queer studies, materialism, and crisis, Heather Love states that she wants “to recall a queer tradition that focuses on the lived experience of structural inequality” and is invested in a dialogue that takes seriously the processes of “making do and getting by” (2011, 131). Following Love, I am seeking to enliven conversations about the intimate lives as well as the sexual and gendered experiences of Black girls that consider their particular vulnerability to the state. I am asking for a dialogue, a practice, and a politic that provide space for Black girls to love and care for themselves, knowing that they are loved and cared for in ways that honor their rights to safety, protection, self-exploration, self-defined happiness, and home.

In an article on the representation of the Black womanhood in music videos, Rana Emerson is able to show that although some videos were clearly degrading to Black women (she calls this hegemonic) and some videos consciously portrayed a positive and empowering image of Black womanhood (counterhegemonic), most presented hegemonic and counterhegemonic themes side by side, offering an “interconnected, . . . complex, often contradictory and multifaceted representation of Black womanhood” (2002, 117). As an example of this type of complex representation, she looks at a video by En Vogue in which the female singers in the group act as seductresses who are in control of their sexuality. As the women sing a rendition of Aretha Franklin’s “Giving Him Something He Can Feel,” the camera scans their bodies, showing them as objects of temptation and sexual desire. The camera also scans the bodies in the all-male audience, portraying them as desirable to the members of En Vogue and potentially to the viewing public watching the video. This display of mutual and consensual desire is missing from the historical narrative and current media representations of Black women’s sexuality, especially within relationships defined as heterosexual. In the En Vogue video the Black male body becomes the object of pleasure and arousal, allowing the women singers to express their sexual subjectivity. Although the concept behind the En Vogue video can be seen as liberating in many ways, expressions of sexual desire are not so easily negotiated by young Black women, the professional adult care providers in their lives, and the larger society.

Black feminist scholars have asserted that the Black female body becomes visible “when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when

it is sexually deviant” (hooks 1992, 66). This is especially true in the context of Black popular cultural forms, where the Black woman’s body is primarily currency, an object whose value exists in its ability to be traded. The refusal of sexual commodification by Black women through claims to fulfillment of their own pleasure and desire has the possibility of creating more accurate and nuanced representations of Black women’s sexual subjectivity. These questions of agency, pleasure, power, and counternarrative performance surround LaT’s spoken-word reading and dance. In addition, we should be attuned to the ways in which LaT was less concerned with the reception her body and performance received than with her investment in commenting on the space of artificial sexual desire constructed through traditional Brown Bean performances and the corresponding exclusion of the bodies, styles, and expressions of desire that fail to replicate this tradition. LaT was also committed to shifting the normative shape of the modes of expression that were valued at the café, to privilege play and irreverence over a respectability that masquerades as creativity.

Both Patricia Hill Collins (2005) and Paul Gilroy (1991) have discussed the interconnected historical development of sexuality and racial discourse in Western culture. Collins, in fact, uses the metaphor of a prison (race) and a closet (sexuality) to address the mutually defining character of race and sexuality. Sexuality is undoubtedly read differently on different bodies, and thus the implication of its expression depends on the positionality of the individual. For young Black women this means being included among the category of women who “represent subjectivities outside of marriage—prostitutes, single mothers, women involved with multiple partners, and particularly black single mothers” (Weitz 1984, as quoted in Fine 1992, 47), and are, therefore, seen as deviant.

Jezebel is a significant cautionary figure in the tale of Black female sexuality. Jezebel is the representation that all Black women fight against as part of the journey toward respectability and social acceptance. In Black feminist literature (Collins 2000 and 2004; Higginbotham 1992; E. White 2001), it appears that there are two primary options: resist the Jezebel image and become a lady who is constrained by rules of propriety to prim and proper asexuality, or attempt to rework the image and reclaim your sexual autonomy. Performances of sexuality and articulations of sexual identities at Fresh Start demonstrate that neither of these options is particularly useful for young Black women. The way they choose to define and act out their sexuality reveals that there are other critical factors at stake beyond social status and mobility. In addition, the Jezebel image does not

function in the same way for Black girls and teenagers as it does for Black women. The dangerous agency of the Jezebel is never fully available to Black girls—who, because of their age, do not fulfill the status of ultimate blameworthiness attributed to the image. Black girls can be fast or promiscuous, but their youth or minor status requires that the state be accountable for their behavior to some degree, which usually translates to the surveillance and disciplining of their bodies and sexual expression. Yet state policing of the intimate and sexual lives of Black girls may look no different from the same policing of the lives of Black women, thus contributing to the conflation of Black girlhood and womanhood in much of the data collected, policies enacted, and scholarship produced on Black women.

Why did LaT's performance make some of us feel so uncomfortable? Crystal immediately covered her face in shame, Rachel felt the need to make a joke to break the awkwardness at our table, and I was unable to put together a meaningful response. All the way home, Crystal kept muttering under her breath, "You is so nasty, just nasty." Finally, LaT told her to either "speak up or shut the fuck up."

I told Crystal, "You know, you don't have to like LaT's poem, but she has just as much of a right to express herself as the guy you were in love with last week."

"Um, okay. Respect differences, whatever," Crystal said.

Rachel, still playing the instigator, piped up with, "GGC 101."

"But answer me this: how is it in any way okay to get up in a public space, unless it is a strip club, and do the booty clap? We all know that was triffin'."² Through the rearview mirror I could see Crystal turned around in her seat and talking to LaT.

"T, that was kinda off the chain," Rachel said, seeming serious now. "I mean, you about to drop a baby like any second now."

"So," LaT oddly seemed to be getting more resolute the more she was challenged by Rachel and Crystal. "Y'all worried about them fake, tryin'-to-be-bourgie motherfuckers think about you? They ain't thinking about nar[y] one of us. I thoroughly enjoyed myself. End of discussion."

"I bet if Mel was there he would have been ready to beat your ass." Rachel was referring to the father of LaT's yet-to-be-born son.

"Please, that Negro would be happy as hell to be getting a shout-out. And ain't no ass beatin' happenin' round here." LaT laughed at the idea.

"You know what, Ms. Aimee?" Rachel turned to me, only half joking. "You getting soft. When you really worked here you wouldn't even let the

girls leave the shelter in Daisy Dukes—right, Ms. Lynnette? And now we got the booty clap going on in public . . .”

Lynnette had seemed lighthearted and amused at the Brown Bean, but when I talked to her in the GGC parking lot after the girls had gone inside, she reacted differently.

“Girl, did you have any idea it was going to be like that? Did you see my face? I think I was blushing, and I’m grown,”³ Lynnette said.

“It’s not like we hadn’t heard it before she went on stage, but it was shocking to actually see it,” I said. “Her pregnant belly and all—it was too much!”

“Should we have stopped her?” Lynnette asked.

“She is almost twenty-two years old, and aren’t we supposed to be teaching them that they own their sexuality?” Jokingly, I added: “Or should I say, ‘Aren’t *you* supposed to be teaching that?’ I technically don’t work here anymore, remember?” But my conclusion was that “I told her what the possible responses could be. She wanted to do it.”

“Oh, that is how you are going to try to get out of this one?” Lynnette laughed. “That was probably why Big Mike was asking you if you were still the shelter director. He probably like, ‘What the hell is going on over at GGC?’”

Ain’t Got No Class, But Can Shake That Ass!

The crowd of regulars at the café had tried hard to appear neutral during LaT’s reading, offering the usual respectful signs of engagement. But when the poem morphed into the booty clap dance, you could feel discomfort spreading across the room. There were a few nervous laughs, but during the dance most people acted as if LaT’s time was up, resuming conversations with their friends and getting up to order a drink or go to the bathroom. No one wanted to look at LaT’s Black, pregnant, barely adult body bent over, butt to the audience. It should be emphasized, however, that the shock of LaT’s performance was partly the shock of seeing anybody of any shape, size, color, age, or gender perform the booty clap dance in the coffeehouse setting. The crowd at the Brown Bean was a combination of college students, young professionals in their mid-twenties to early thirties, and students from the nearby public high school. The audience was always overwhelmingly Black, a mix of middle- and working-class people, with about one man to every four women. Big Mike, the manager, knew that we were from GGC only because Lynnette made a deal with him so that we didn’t have to pay the cover charge. We never overtly

made our affiliation known, but neither did we try to conceal it from any of the other patrons or employees. But after our third time at the Brown Bean, we were considered regulars, and—treating us like all the other regulars—the staff let us know that they knew our business.

The most scandalous verses spoken to this crowd before LaT read her poem included mentions of “chocolate nipples” and “silky smooth thighs.” No one had ever said *fuck*, although people had used every sanitized word in the dictionary to convey the same meaning. Although patronized by a relatively mixed group in terms of class, the Brown Bean was definitely marked as a middle-class space. The enforcing of a dress code and the assessment of a cover charge help protect these classed boundaries, along with specials offered to members of sororities and fraternities, corporate groups, and small business owners. In the brief time that LaT was on stage, she was able to reveal the intersection of race, class, and gendered sexuality there.⁴

In the context of the welfare system and social service care institutions, the sexual lives of poor adolescent women receive an inordinate amount of attention. The fear of future pregnancies out of wedlock and the belief that the state has the right to mandate the family structures of poor women lead caseworkers to violate the privacy of young women’s sexual and domestic lives. These workers seek information to assure them that the single, poor young women for whom they are responsible are not engaging in deviant sex. More positive attitudes toward sex, often in a hip-hop feminist framework, challenge Black feminists to consider the sexual lives of Black women outside of the “enduring legacy that frames black women as hypersexual” in favor of “an equally important history of black women asserting sexual autonomy and self-defining their sexual desires and realities” (Lindsey 2013, 63). Sex positivism makes room for Black women to move through, but not necessarily past, histories of bodily degradation and sexual violence that undoubtedly shape the ways in which they explore and experience their sexuality. The healthy sense of freedom and self-reclaiming implied through sex positivism has the potential to, as Lindsey claims, support more nuanced approaches to understanding the ways in which a younger generation of Black women think about sex and sexuality. Within this sex-positive framing, however, it is important to remain mindful of the privilege inherent in the ability to foreground pleasure and desire, for Black girls in their everyday lives as well as for Black women theorizing and speculating on the ways in which sexual identities and orientations may be read as positive. The autonomy on which sex positivism depends is, like all sovereignty, embedded in relations of power.

On the way back to GGC, Rachel and Crystal attempted to police LaT, citing as inappropriate the context, her pregnant body, and the sexual expression it had performed. When that didn't seem to sway LaT, Rachel evoked LaT's boyfriend, Mel, to see if either his gender or the place of significance he occupied in her life would rein her in. Often in the shelter I would hear girls use "Imma tell [insert the boyfriend's name here]" in the same way that children threaten to tell on their siblings to their parents. And the phrase was said in varied situations, not just ones relevant to the couple's commitment to each other as exclusive partners. Although it was used in a joking fashion, even in play, maleness was afforded supreme authority. LaT's response to Rachel seemed to imply that her boyfriend approved of and shared in her sexual enjoyment and did not necessarily have a place of authority in their relationship.

As I listened to the girls' conversation in the back of the van, I was not convinced by LaT's overconfident attitude and wondered if we had left her unprotected. She must have felt the discomfort in the room and been affected by it to some degree. Or perhaps I was limited by my indoctrination in a society that believes there must be some negative consequence for sexual enjoyment and that a young single pregnant woman must internalize the social shame thrown at her. LaT continued to come to the Brown Bean up until Mel Jr.'s birth, and she continued to be just as critical of the "fake poets" as ever, although she never read again. Although I discussed the "He Fucked Me" incident with her on various occasions, she never demonstrated regret or even slight embarrassment. It was not that I wished to shame her; I was just suspicious that the re-working of the Jezebel image by a thrown-back-in-our-faces enactment of sexual vitality could be enacted without harming the actor. But just as LaT need not internalize shame for others to continue to try to shame her, and for this shame to be reflected in very real and concrete ways,⁵ her lack of legible regret does not mean that her sexual expression is entirely free. Like her young, pregnant Black body, LaT's public performance of sexuality—regardless of her feelings of esteem or power related to it—can be used against her in making and enforcing of social welfare policies, program guidelines, resource allocations, and employment practices. "He fucked me" in this context takes on a new and larger meaning.

Sex Education in the Shelter

“You know, you’re too pretty for me to leave you on the couch like that,” he said, pulling me toward him. I didn’t know that, but I did understand then that there was no such thing as safe, only safer; that this, if it didn’t happen now, would happen later but not better.

—*Danielle Evans, Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*

To tell the truth is to become beautiful to begin to love yourself, value yourself, and that’s political in its most profound way.

—*June Jordan*

Agencies like GGC that work with youth populations often bump up against the philosophies and practices of government-run welfare agencies, school systems, and training programs that work with the same population. For example, GGC’s mission of providing a safe, nonjudgmental space where young women could make informed choices about their lives was not always congruent with the messages that the young women received from their caseworkers at the Family Independence Agency (FIA, the local welfare office) and their teachers in training programs like the Job Corps. For example, shelter residents often complained that their FIA caseworkers were judgmental and chastised them for being single parents, often assuming that they were not able to live at home because they didn’t know how to obey their parents. Several of the FIA workers that I came into contact with while I was a GGC employee had a fundamentally antagonistic attitude toward young people in general and young women in particular. In training sessions and community advocacy meetings with these women workers, the sentiments they expressed most often were about not wanting to work with girls because they are difficult and hardheaded, not as compliant as boys. It was also generally assumed that young women, particularly pregnant or parenting ones, were promiscuous and had, as one worker stated, “low moral standards.” The challenge that faced the staff at Fresh Start was finding a way to empower young women while also providing a structure that did not demean, underestimate, or stereotype them in the way they often experienced what was called education and guidance in other institutional environments. The issue of sexuality and sex education is probably the most difficult subject to tackle in this regard.

Michelle Fine’s description of the three most prevalent discourses of female sexuality in public schools also applies to other settings such as

the welfare office, the homes of extended family members, the street, and well-meaning agencies like GGC. These three discourses are sexuality as violence, sexuality as victimization, and sexuality as individual morality. There is a fourth discourse, the discourse of desire, that has been silenced in this setting. Fine demonstrates how outside of the classroom setting, young women actively and openly discuss desire and pleasure as an essential aspect of the conversation about sex. By ignoring desire, Fine asserts, young women are not allowed to "explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs and limits" and thus are unable to be released from a "position of receptivity" (1992, 35). Carissa Froyum's work (2010) offers additional insight on the discourses that frame young women's sexuality as always on the verge of impending violence and danger, or as moral failure. Froyum conducted research on a sex education curriculum for low-income Black girls that essentially proposed waiting until monogamous marriage to engage in sexual activity. The race and class identities of the young women were significant in how the adult facilitators thought about and taught sexual restraint. The adult Black women running the program believed that if the girls not only abstained from sex but dressed conservatively, they could challenge racialized stereotypes regarding Black girls' promiscuity.

In this program, sexual restraint was presented as a "positive social and identity resource" (Froyum 2010, 70). Froyum pushes feminist theorists to take into account the race and class dimensions of sexual scripts for girls and the ways in which they may be recast and reworked to address the social and structural challenges that Black girls face, as defined by Black women and the girls themselves. For example, the Black youth whom Cathy Cohen interviewed regarding their ideas on Black love, deviance, and the sexual politics of morality expressed conservative viewpoints that did not align with their actions, demonstrating the "contradictory nature of their decision making" (2010, 56). The way young Black women talk about sex (in terms of personal responsibility, not of structural constraints) reveals their hyperawareness of the representation of Black women as sexually deviant. We can assume, then, that sexual scripts are often used by Black girls, in ways similar to how they were used by the Fresh Start residents, at least as much to counter these negative stereotypes and protect their self-image as to describe the events they experience.

When I left the Community Outreach Program to work in the Fresh Start shelter, I was shocked to find that the shelter had no consistent program or workshop devoted to sex education and healthy relationships like

the one for the teens in the street outreach. The closest thing to this was a program called Healthy Moms, which was only for the pregnant and parenting clients and which focused mostly on the physical health of mother and child and the development of parenting skills. Working midnight RA shifts in my first few months of employment allowed me to be included in many casual conversations about sex and intimate relationships. In these conversations, residents spoke candidly about what they enjoyed about sex, including different positions and techniques they had tried to increase their partner's and their own pleasure. Some girls talked about their frustrations with male lovers who failed to understand that they wanted only a sexual relationship with them.

One eighteen-year-old woman who identified herself as bisexual said: "They act like only guys want to hit it and run. We can save a lot of time if we just come out up front and [be] honest and admit what we want. If me and my last boyfriend would have done that, I wouldn't of wasted a whole year with him."

A big theme among the young women who had recently given birth was self-respect, a topic they preached to other girls: "Okay, you may say it is just sex, but in the back of your head you thinking that it could be more. So you need to be honest with yourself, ask for what you want, and if he ain't going to give it to you have enough self-respect to move on to the next."

One new mother who had just finished pumping milk on the couch next to me commented: "I saw this painting once where they had a pregnant woman's body and they showed it like her breast and her stomach were like a landscape. It was drawn right on her, like she was the earth. That kept coming to me when I was pregnant. I mean, y'all don't understand how a woman's body is like the earth. We are second only to God because we can create life. You should tell that to the fools you mess with and be like, 'Bow down!'"

Some young women were less sure of the attitude they wanted to take regarding sex, their bodies, and the individuals they chose to share or not share those bodies with. One resident said: "I only done it once and I am like, 'What is the big whoop?' I mean, I ain't saying it is off limits to me, but you won't see me running, chasing after no guy. And if a guy is chasing after you, he want something. I don't care if it's sex, money, food, a place to stay—he trying to get something from you."

Young women who identified themselves as lesbians also shared their experiences in what was mostly a heterosexually oriented conversation,

and they talked about similar issues related to trust and intimacy: "Girls is just the same. You find some that want something from you and try to use you for sex, just like men. You can't let people get in too close. That's when you start trippin' an' forgettin' yourself, and a girl can do that to you too."

I was sometimes asked for my opinion on whether or not I thought they were being played by their boyfriends and about how to handle difficult interpersonal conversations like breaking up or confronting a suspected cheater. Although the sexually explicit conversations were never censored for me, I was rarely actively brought into these parts of the discussion. When I was, it was generally when I was asked to respond to a concrete question like "You can't get HIV from giving head, can you?" and "Is there sperm in pre-cum?" The day after working these shifts, I would review the notes I scrawled about the residents' comments and questions. I pulled together a small team that included two RAs and the curriculum coordinator to design a workshop the residents named Sex, Love, and Lies.

I didn't know if I should be a part of the workshop. Technically, workshop facilitation fell under the responsibilities of the curriculum coordinator and caseworkers, but I was always involved in a good deal of direct service because we were often short-staffed, and I found it the most enjoyable part of working in the shelter. And for the RAs, this was another way to gain recognition, in a formalized, official setting, for their knowledge that was usually undervalued within the shelter. In an anonymous vote, the residents all agreed that they wanted me to stay. However, I soon got the sense that some of the staff felt otherwise.

One of the RAs and, in some cases, the curriculum coordinator didn't feel at ease with practicing nonjudgmental facilitation, which I felt was essential for this workshop to be effective. They weren't fully comfortable with the fact that they couldn't just "tell them the facts about what they should do" instead of taking the time to let the young women walk through the process of interrogating their feelings and helping each other come up with the healthiest and most viable answers in each situation. I decided to stay for the first two sessions and then just meet with the staff afterward to help them work through any challenges they had encountered and prepare for the next session.

The Sex, Love, and Lies participants included all the young women in the shelter at that time: ten adults, two minors, four pregnant adults, and two adult women with one child each. In the first session they were asked to fill out an anonymous⁶ questionnaire designed by the staff. Some of the results are below.

All of the eighteen young women claimed to be sexually active. Only two reported that they used condoms at least some of the time; the other sixteen revealed that they never used condoms. Some of the alternative methods of birth control the residents listed were “pulling out,” “have sex right after my period,” “take it in the ass,” and “we see what happens.” Every young woman said that there had been a time when she was forced to have sex. Fourteen of the eighteen said that they often had sex even though they didn’t want to because they wanted to “please their man,” “keep their man,” “or just get it over with.”

Only four young women (perhaps the ones who had been in the activity room the night I was asked about this) knew that you could transmit HIV by having oral sex. Fifteen young women stated that they had previously been diagnosed and treated for a sexually transmitted infection, the most common one being chlamydia. Yet all of the women stated that they were not worried about getting such an infection and rated their chances of contracting one as “very low.”

The questionnaire was not just about the negative consequences or aspects of sexual activity. However, I present this aspect of the questionnaire to show the stark distinction between the young women’s active physical participation in sex with their lack of knowledge, pleasure, and emotional engagement. Although seventeen of the eighteen young women claimed that they had been in love (these were unsolicited comments), none of them stated that they were in love with their current sexual partners. I am not implying that there should be a direct correlation between love and sex, but I am seeking to demonstrate what the young women identified as significant in their experience. It is important to consider what it means when seventeen out of eighteen young women spontaneously admit that they have been in love, would like to be in love again, and are not being emotionally fulfilled by their current sexual partners, whom they variously describe as “a way to get extra money,” “just for now, not to be bored,” “a boy too young to be a man to me and his child,” someone who “helps me when I’m horny,” “he can lay pipe,”⁷ and “transportation.” Aside from the two comments “helps me when I’m horny” and “he can lay pipe,” none of the other young women mentioned desire anywhere in the survey as a part of their decision to engage in sex. However, sex can have material benefits even when it does not provide emotional or physical ones. Money and regular access to transportation can be exchanged for sexual favors even if the exchange is not explicitly discussed or negotiated.

We used the information from the questionnaires to decide how to proceed with the second session. I urged the three staff facilitators not to plan too far in advance since, as we had seen, revelations would occur at each meeting and should guide the structure of subsequent sessions. The young women's responses were not a moral issue. Their ignorance about the transmission of disease and their own bodies along with their matter-of-fact attitudes toward their own experiences of sexual abuse were issues related to their health and safety. The performance of uninhibited sexuality late at night in the activity room was not the full picture of what the young women had experienced and how they felt about it. They bragged about sexual conquests and unapologetically indulging in the pleasure of sex. Stories of sexual skill and the ability to experience orgasmic pleasure were offered to top ones previously told, and rather than dividing the girls, they created an environment of solidarity. Yet I didn't want to assume that the narratives told in the activity room were any less real than the words anonymously scrawled on the workshop questionnaire. One in three Fresh Start residents report at intake that they have been sexually abused, with the vast majority of this abuse perpetrated by adult males in their families or communities.⁸ Given the silence about sexual abuse in Black communities and the fact that for every act of sexual violence reported, fifteen instances go unreported, it is safe to assume that the number of young women at the shelter who have experienced sexual violence was much higher than we knew. The young women's sexuality, consensual sexual experiences, and sexual abuse cannot be disengaged from their experience of poverty. Living in circumstances marked by dire economic stress means that sex is not just or only about pleasure or unfettered agency, since relationships are often complicated by the bartering and trade used to survive and meet basic material needs. Sex is frequently part of these exchanges for young Black women, and the narratives they tell about their sexual desires and experiences often conceal or deceptively appear to revel in the dangers inherent in this dynamic.

In the second session we dispensed with any games and extraneous team-building exercises and got straight to the point. We addressed our concerns with the residents' lack of safe sex practices and broached the topic of sexual abuse. We also asked the residents how they thought Sex, Love, and Lies could benefit them most. You could almost hear a collective exhalation from the young women in the room. Margaret, one of the RAs involved in planning the sessions, said she felt like the girls "finally felt relieved that they could take off their armor." The group collectively

decided that they wanted staff members to just give them the facts about safe sex and the spread of sexually transmitted infections. In addition, although the mothers in the group seemed embarrassed to admit it, they wanted to review how their menstrual cycles worked and get an “overall breakdown of the female and male genitalia.”

The shelter staff made fun of the plastic penises that were used in the Community Outreach Program and the condom relay races they used to teach the girls how to put on a condom (in record time, no less). Sex was discussed in this program freely, without self-consciousness or moral undertones. It was just another conversation. Condoms, lubricant packets, and dental dams were posted with tacks on the walls of staff cubicles. The girls in the program, who were a bit younger than shelter residents, could talk about the process of ovulation and recite all the symptoms of gonorrhea. But in the shelter it seemed the focus on employment and working the program overshadowed the larger issues of the residents’ physical and emotional health.

Although the residents made it clear that they wanted to just be given information about safe sex and their bodies, there were other things that they identified as issues they wanted to process as a group and openly discuss. The things that they said they wanted to “find answers to” revolved around figuring out how to trust without getting hurt and learning how to develop respectful, reciprocal relationships. In this discussion sex was framed as something that was currently a prerequisite—something that had to be done to, as one of the residents put it, “get some of the basics covered.” These basics, they told us, were not confined to the material, but included desire and the pleasure of having “a body next to yours.” Through our discussion, the sexual dramas in the activity room were revealed to be the performance of feelings the residents had experienced but that were by no means repeated with any regularity. When the curriculum coordinator asked the young women about the difference between the way they talked to each other about sex and the way they felt about sex, a twenty-year-old woman named Lisa offered this explanation:

When we talk about sex it is just like when you telling somebody about your trip to Cedar Point.⁹ Yeah, you went one time a long time ago as a kid and had fun, but then you go now and it’s not the same. But everybody got you hyped up to believe that it is, and so you tell them when you get back, “Oh, it was the bomb, and we did this and that—it was off the hook!” It’s not like it wasn’t fun, but what you are telling is

from what you think you remember and what other people tell you it should be like. So it's not like you lying. You—.

Lisa's voice trailed off and another young woman, eighteen years old and pregnant, jumped in: "You just hoping it can be like that."

The other young women appeared to be thinking about what had just been said but didn't offer any other counter or supporting explanation. Such comments reveal that the talks in the activity room and the questionnaires are not inconsistent with one another. Questions of sex and sexuality for young Black women are not simply matters of desire, survival sex, victimization, or morality. These young women consciously try to figure out how they would like to experience sex as pleasure, as part of a loving healthy relationship, and as a form of self-expression. Social service agencies and public educational institutions are concerned with policing the sexual practices of poor young women, but these women show that we need to move beyond the sensationalized and voyeuristic aspects of their sexuality and consider how it intersects with their other needs, such as the need to establish loving interactions, to eat, to live in a safe home, and to exert control over their own lives.

Doing Masculinity

I was sitting in the newly constructed park in the middle of Detroit's main boulevard, Woodward Avenue, enjoying the free downtown wireless connection and trying to ignore the guy I could see in my peripheral vision who was walking toward me. The face looked familiar, but I was unable to put the young man in context. He reached out to hug me and greeted me by name, then laughed when it was obvious I wasn't even able to offer the pretense of knowing him.

"Miss Aimee, it's me, Summer." The only Summer I knew had been a resident at the Fresh Start shelter when I first started working there. She was in the first group of young women I had met over three years before. The Summer I knew was tiny, with small, delicate bones and an even tinier birdlike voice. At the time, her newborn son, although quite small himself, seemed to weigh her down when she carried him and made her look even more miniature and breakable. This Summer was also, according to the RAs, "boy crazy" and set the record for arguments about using the pay phone after the restricted hours so she could check up on the whereabouts of whichever young man with whom she was currently involved.

The Summer I knew was extremely proud of her “good hair” and taunted the other girls in the shelter with claims that their “short nappy heads” were the reason that they couldn’t “catch a man.” The Summer I thought I knew wore her hair long, in corkscrew curls, and would be caught dead before leaving the shelter looking anything but fly. Her clothing choices were a source of aggravation for many of the RAs, who felt her close-fitting dresses and hot pants were “ho-ish” and trashy.

The Summer who stood in front of me, laughing at my inability to hide my surprise and close my gaping mouth, was unrecognizable to me. This Summer wore long, baggy denim shorts that hit her at her shins, almost meeting the stark white athletic socks that she wore on her small feet inside Adidas slides. Her striped polo shirt hung down past her behind and seemed weighted down by the huge gold medallion around her neck that swung low, near her belly, and looked like it could take her out for the count if she moved too quickly. This Summer had a close-cropped fade haircut with deep-ridged waves, signaling her still very meticulous grooming practices. This Summer looked like a preteen male rapper. But Summer was still Summer, even though she appeared new to me.

I got up to return Summer’s hug and confessed, “Girl, I can’t even lie. I had no idea who you were.”

“Yeah, I saw you play the ‘I don’t know who this dude is, and he better not step to me’ role.” I was relieved that she broke the ice and allowed me to laugh through my disorientation and shock.

“Well, how are you? How is your son? What has been going on with you since I last saw you? Where are you living? Are things okay?” I delivered the questions rapid fire, and she doubled over in exaggerated laughter, holding her belly and hitting me in the back—even her mannerisms had changed. She seemed to be working hard to give me the full masculine effect of her new (to me) self.

“You still asking a lot of questions! I been good. You know, I went to the Job Corps and got me a trade. I got into carpentry and been even doing some furniture making. I was working for this ol’ dude, but I been talking to some of my dogs about leaving and starting my own business. I can get a small business loan and branch out and do my own. ‘Cause in a few years I wanna start thinking about buying my own house.” Summer’s update flowed seamlessly, as if she had gotten used to telling lots of people in a short period of time about the changes she was initiating in her life.

"Wow. That's fantastic, Summer." Buying a house seemed so far away from my graduate student possibilities. "I have heard mixed things about the Job Corps, but you liked your experience there?"

"I mean, I could complain, but I won't. Like with anything, you have to find a way to make it work for you. Mugs need to just learn how to get dey hustle on. I saw that it could work for me, and I wasn't about to come up out of there without a job making money. Otherwise I could just work the street—there's always paper there."

"Right. Well, you look good. I'm happy for you," I told her.

"Yeah, just staying away from those girls—you know, they get you all twisted. I don't mess around with those girls. You know, they get you into trouble, so I am just living the single life right now." Summer took a deep breath and paused after she said this. She seemed to be waiting for me to ask her a question. I didn't.

"Well, yeah," I said. "Relationships can sometimes take your focus away from the goals that you are working on if you let them become a distraction."

Summer kept on. "Me? I don't get distracted. I'm different from when I was at the shelter. I am trying to own some property and get my own thing started. That is the only way we are ever going to get ahead. You got to own something and you got to work for yourself. Otherwise you just a slave."

"I'm happy for you, Summer. It sounds like you have figured out what you want for yourself. That is a huge accomplishment."

Summer grabbed my hand to shake it, then pulled me in for a quick hug goodbye.

Summer had found a way to work the the Job Corps system and get out of it what she felt would make her ultimately successful and truly independent. Whether she was the ultrafeminine young woman of the past or the current more masculine version in b-boy attire, one thing that remained discernibly consistent about Summer was her self-determination and confidence. She always gave the impression that anything she was doing at the time made sense and was the right thing to do. I imagine the Job Corps instructors and administration being just as challenged and inspired by Summer's tenacious self-protective tendencies as the Fresh Start staff had been. It is difficult to say if those qualities alone were what got her into the coveted carpentry track. In the estimation of the young women I spoke with about the Job Corps process, getting what you felt you deserved

in the program meant being overly aggressive, strategically charming, or simply “boyish”—a term much used by all of the young women. The options for getting ahead that these young women identified for themselves were not confined to the Job Corps setting or to the current historical moment. The angry Black bitch; the cunning seductress; and the asexual, overpowering thug are tropes that have been used to define the ways of thinking about and potentially being a Black woman. Even when the stereotype has somewhat positive connotations, like the image of the superwoman, it is still a representation that requires a subjugation of the self to the interests of others and a strength that is presented as more combative and aggressive than empowering. Conscious performances and skilled navigation of strategies for social mobility are how young Black girls try to bridge the gap of the missing middle.

My bumping into Summer and facing my inability to directly inquire about the obvious changes in her self-representation, and even the fact that I found these changes so deeply curious, came at a very interesting time. Over the years that I worked as shelter director, there were five young women who openly identified themselves as gay. The sexual identity of a resident did not appear to be a significant or noteworthy issue to the staff or to the other young women in the shelter. In the Sex, Love, and Lies workshop, it came as second nature to staff members to alter game scenarios and questionnaires to make sure that they included the possibilities of same-sex attraction, bisexuality, and young women who chose not to define their sexuality through any of our available categories. Although shelter staff members were not without flaw in this regard, they strove to be conscious of the potential presence of youth who might be questioning their sexual identity or engaging in practices that they preferred to keep private. I knew that some of the staff members had personal beliefs that anything other than monogamous heterosexual unions were sinful, wrong, or just odd, but they were also aware that their personal beliefs directly opposed the GGC philosophy of acceptance, and thus they kept their feelings to themselves. This all changed, however, when a young woman named Dominique came into the shelter a few months before my encounter with Summer. I was no longer working in the shelter, but I was still at GGC regularly, doing volunteer work in the after-school program and working on call as an RA in the shelter.

Dominique grew up in a middle-class, predominantly Black suburb of Detroit with her mother. Her parents got divorced when she was four years old, and her father had moved to Tampa, Florida, shortly there-

after. Dominique had seen him only three times since then. When she was a sophomore in high school, Dominique knew that she was attracted to other girls, even though she had a boyfriend who became the father of her son later that year. Dominique came out to her mother when she was a junior. She said that her mother was "cool with it" at first but then couldn't live with the reality of seeing Dominique actually involved with and displaying affection toward other young women. Fighting became a routine interaction between Dominique and her mother soon after she expressed her sexual preferences. The police were called to their house more times than Dominique could count by neighbors troubled by their loud arguments, which started to turn to physical aggression around the time Dominique was approaching graduation from high school. Dominique entered the shelter on a Saturday night after her mother pulled a knife on her and demanded that she leave. She did so, taking only her son with her before the police could come. With no other family in the area and not wanting to stay with friends who were already overtaxed or dealing with precarious situations in their own homes, Dominique called her baby's father from a pay phone and told him to drive her to Fresh Start. She had heard about the shelter from a friend whose cousin had stayed there years ago, when it was still located in a church.

Dominique was stocky and muscular and seemed much taller than her five feet and three inches. She told me that because of her build, the way she dressed, and her low-cut fade, girls always flirted with her, mistaking her for a young man. This apparently happened at the shelter on her first day when she was standing outside smoking by the dumpster, and two of the residents thought she was a boy from the neighborhood. Dominique also possessed a low-key confidence that was magnetic. The minute she came into the shelter, the entire plane of interpersonal dynamics shifted dramatically. Dominique was completely out and had just as many female visitors as the other residents had boyfriends—if not more. "Mackin' hos"¹⁰ and her overall powers of seduction were common topics of conversation when she was in the room. It did not take more than a week before the other residents started calling Dominique "Pimp," "Pimp Daddy," and "Big Dom." It was quite evident that the RAs responded to Dominique differently than they did to the other residents. Although she was always finding some way to get out of a chore—eventually managing to convince the other residents to do it for her—she was hardly ever reprimanded. The conversations I overheard between Dominique and the shelter staff regarding rule violations and missed appointments sounded playful

and flirtatious. Dominique was strategic and charming, and she quickly learned how to “mack” the shelter.

Within a month, there was a noticeable change in at least five other young women in the shelter. These young women made a physical and behavioral transformation similar to the shift I saw in Summer. They traded in fitted jeans and baby T-shirts for baggy jeans that hung off their behinds and oversize sweat- and T-shirts, and sneakers or Timberland boots replaced their high-heeled sandals and wedges. The caseworkers and RAs responded to all of this as if it were a joke. “Please, they just trying to copy Dom,” was what one RA said, which seemed to be the general consensus. However, once the change moved from attire to language and mannerisms, it stopped being treated as a joke and became a problem. The Dominique wannabes had boyfriends before they came into the shelter who now stopped dropping by for visits in the evening, and the wannabes all made attempts to change the way they walked by moving slower and with a wider gait. Watching the forced hypermasculine hand movements and body carriage usually reserved for male rappers (and usually only when they are in the context of a choreographed music video), the question at the forefront of the mind of almost everyone on the shelter staff was, is this for real?

We categorized Dominique, whose performances were perhaps the most dramatic of all, as sincere because she came into the shelter identifying herself as a lesbian and never gave any indication that she wavered in this identity. The wannabes, by their very name, symbolized insincerity. The assumptions we made about these young women were a reflection of our acceptance of hegemonic notions of gender and its viable and, therefore, authentic performance. Dominique was “real” because her performance was consistent, implying a permanency that made her masculine identification appear innate. The “wannabes” were not able to pull off their performances, failing to convince us. And what were we trying to be convinced of? That they were no longer sexually attracted to males? That they were questioning their sexual identity? Why was it so important to us that their intentions be apparent in their self-presentations?

Wannabes are nothing new in the residential single-sex setting. Case studies by Rose Giallombardo (1974) and Alice Propper (1981) talk about how butch and fem gendered roles were taken on by girls in juvenile justice settings as a way to fulfill needs that were normally met differently in the outside world. In some cases girls re-created the roles of husband and wife to establish a fictive kin network in which they provided mutual

aid, emotional reciprocity, and security and protection to everyone in the family (Giallombardo 1974, 81). In other cases, there was not such a strong sense of solidarity, and young women were looking to fulfill their emotional and sexual needs without making a commitment to a large network of people and relationships. Girls who, like Dominique, entered the facility identified as lesbian were called Trues, and the girls who got "turned out" after being in the institution were called "wanna-bes." *Turned out* was a phrase still very much in use among the young women in the shelter as well as those in other GGC programs who had some experience with the Job Corps and other similar vocational programs.

The way *turned out* is used by these girls conveys more of a blurriness and sense of complication than the concern expressed by staff members about the reality or fiction of the wannabes' gender performances. Dominique, as well as Janice and Crystal, used *turned out* to mean that a girl who identifies herself as heterosexual develops a relationship with another girl, which can be either "just sexual or both sexual and emotional," Dominique told me. When the relationship has ended or the young woman leaves the residential setting, she may continue to be involved with the other young woman, become involved with men, or decide that she will be undecided and "do whatever she is feeling with whoever she is feeling at the time." Getting turned out does not necessarily mean that a young woman has "shed" her heterosexual identity; instead, it means that she has, in Dominique's words, "become open to the possibilities."

Dominique discussed the nature of being turned out in a way that revealed she viewed gender and sexuality as somewhat arbitrary and unstable. Talking with Dominique, I learned that the Fresh Start wannabes were not necessarily being turned out. Their performances were about transgressing gender categories by seeing if they could play with the social consequences of being masculine or feminine. The catalyst for all of this was the effect produced by Dominique that they witnessed not only in the shelter but also outside of GGC. When the other Fresh Start residents hung out with Dominique, both males and females responded to them in ways the young women found appealing. For example, one of the wannabes told me that she didn't feel like she needed to be "in petty competition with other girls to see who is like the prettiest or who has the best clothes. You don't deal with that, and it's like you out of the game . . . you don't even have to play."

Another young woman labeled a wannabe said that she liked being able to walk down the street or go to the mall without "having to fuck with

dudes” since “they don’t even be paying me no mind, and I don’t have to fight off all that bullshit.” Dominique added that “some girls don’t even care about dudes thinking they are gay. They would rather be labeled gay for a minute and get some respect than be treated like a bubblehead.” Our curiosity as shelter staff members was grounded in a conflation of sex and gender that made us focus on what the wannabes’ behaviors and stylized appearance said about the nature of their sexual lives more than on the implications for their social, economic, and political lives.

Within several weeks, tension developed between Dominique and the wannabes. During the last few shifts I worked on call in the shelter, Dominique ignored them or made jokes under her breath whenever one of the wannabes made a comment. On one late Saturday night, I convinced most of the girls to stay up to watch back-to-back movies with me. I hated it when they all ran to their rooms, because when I was left alone with just the TV it was all too easy to nod off. Although I kept telling myself that I had officially completed my fieldwork, I always brought the tools of the trade with me when I was called in to work shifts. There was always so much going on that seemed to connect directly to whatever theme I was currently trying to work through in my writing. I brought my tape recorder and laptop with me, but I rarely had a chance to use them. Most of the time I was too busy holding babies, making elaborate late night snacks with the insomniacs, or just too engrossed in the present conversation to remember how good it would be to have it on tape. In these cases, I would get a cramp in my hand from attempting to quickly jot down just enough key information to elaborate on later with the help of my computer. This night, a half-hour after the second movie was over, Dominique was the only resident who was still up and in the activity room. She said she was bored and couldn’t sleep. The baby room monitor for her son, Imani, was by her side in case he woke up. I used the opportunity to talk about the wannabes.

“Can you record me?” Dominique asked. I generally asked the residents if I could record them, so I was taken aback by Dominique’s request.

“Want to make sure you hear me.” Dominique set up the recorder and turned off the TV while I headed to the kitchen to get something for us to eat. To honor Dominique’s request to be taped and documented in a very specific way, I offer here the full transcript of our conversation.

AIMEE: It seems like there is some tension in the shelter between you and some of the other girls. I noticed it when I worked last week and again tonight.

DOMINIQUE: I really feel annoyed with them, the followers. That is all they really are to me. I am tired of them. It is just been going on for too long, and I feel myself being about to go off but I don't want to be kicked out of the shelter.

AIMBE: What happened in particular?

DOMINIQUE: I wish people would learn how to just be true to themselves. It is so annoying when you get up in a place around females around this age who don't know who they are yet 'cause they will just cling to anything. I came up in here, and you had girls who all they had to converse about was guys this and a dude said that and what Imma do 'bout this one who is not calling me back and how about this one who is sleeping with my best friend. I mean, it was nonsense; complete and utter nonsense, and I listen to this shit for like two weeks. Okay. Flash forward a week after these conversations. Stacey and them think that I am dykey but don't really think I am gay because I have Imani. So when they find out I am gay, they start acting like they are into women too.

AIMBE: But how do you know they aren't? [long dramatic pause from Dominique to emphasize the look on her face that says, "Are you really that stupid?"] I mean really, what do they tell you?

DOMINIQUE: These girls came in here wearing hoochie mama skirts, hair weaved all out, nails done up, the whole nine. Now they look harder 'n Lil Jon¹¹ and talking about liking pussy. Okay, key word here is, and I will spell it out . . . t-a-l-k-i-n-g. I mean, if you going get turned out, get turned out, but don't perp¹² like you are a butch dyke. I don't even know why staff was tripping so hard to ask like, "Are they really gay?" I heard Erica [one of the caseworkers] asking Stacey like [imitating Erica's clinical voice], "So Stacey, um, not to intrude, but do you think you might be questioning your sexuality? I mean, it is okay if you are, but I just want to know if I can support you in any way." She seemed so dumb to me.

AIMBE: Erica or Stacey?

DOMINIQUE: I was actually thinking about Stacey, but I guess you could throw Erica on up in there too.

AIMBE: What did Stacey say?

DOMINIQUE: I probably shouldn't be saying this 'cause I was eavesdropping by her cubicle, but she was like, "No! No! No!" acting all shocked and offended.

AIMEE: Is that why you are upset with her?

DOMINIQUE: I guess my real reason for being pissed is that I am tired of the bullshit. The only reason they trying to even think about acting gay is because of me. So I was just having this fantasy over and over again these past couple days. Imagine this: what if I walked up in the activity room one day with a weave down to my butt, a miniskirt, heels on, and talking about, "Damn! I met this fine ass dude at the bus stop." What do you think they would do? [long pause] No, Ms. Aimee, I am seriously asking you what you think they would do.

AIMEE: I don't know. I think it could be different for each of the girls. I don't really know how important it is to each of them what you do at this point. I mean, even if it started with you—even if you were their inspiration, they have been in this mode for several months now. They have probably found some other meaning in it now.

DOMINIQUE: That's deep. I'll be honest. That is real deep. But [short pause] wrong. I know they would be confused, running around like chickens with they heads off. And then, in like one day, they would be back to they old selves.

AIMEE: So you think that you are the only reason why they have seemed to change?

DOMINIQUE: No. I know that I am the *only* reason what initiated it.

AIMEE: What would be some other reasons?

DOMINIQUE: First and foremost, the man issue. Most of these girls get caught up in the wrong men and make all the wrong decisions in their lives because they are looking for that male stamp of approval. To the point where like they wouldn't even mind acting like a man if that means they get respect from a man.

AIMEE: Umm. I understand what you are saying. But respect is a major thing to have and not easy for everyone to earn.

DOMINIQUE: Exactly. That's why you can't fake it.

In this exchange, Dominique expresses anger over her perception that the wannabes do not wannabe identified as gay but do wannabe identified with the masculine presentation of a butch lesbian identity that will let them pass as hard and earn them respect. Unfortunately, none of the young women labeled wannabes would agree to talk with me. The only information I could squeeze out directly from one of them was the comment I noted above about not wanting to be in competition with other young women for both male and female attention and approval based on appearance. Dominique did not have a problem with the wannabes' performance of masculinity, just with their attempted performance of homosexuality. To Dominique, the masculine performance was a caricature of Black masculinity as portrayed in popular culture and given traction through the media's obsession with the Black urban thug. The high visibility of this image is, Dominique implies, what allows it to be easily appropriated through dress and mannerisms.

From Dominique's perspective, sexuality, on the other hand, is rooted in desire and the acting on this desire. Dominique was hurt by Stacey's immediate rejection of a lesbian identity when questioned by Erica, her caseworker; she took offense at Stacey's incredulous "No!" Through her frustration, Dominique is still able to consider possibilities for the wannabes' behavior and, in this reflection, extends her discussion to include young women beyond the wannabes, like the majority of the young women at Fresh Start—including Dominique—who seemed to be striving to reach a comfortable balance between garnering respect from others and not losing their self-respect in the process. Although performing respectability is ultimately about approval and validation, it can never guarantee a satisfactory outcome.

Gender, like respectability, is about performances and readings of those performances.¹³ When someone is illegible to another through the lens of normative gender categories, this is disconcerting primarily for what it means for disturbing the first person's understanding of his or her own behavior, presentation, and knowledge of self. As Betsy Lucal is able to demonstrate through an exploration of responses to her own ambiguous gender display, gender labels enable us to interact (1999, 783). In the case of the wannabes, it was their sexuality—not their gender—that raised questions; their practices—not their displays—were matters of the utmost curiosity and concern for the staff. However, the wannabes were using a gender display to gain the benefits of what the male gender symbolizes. They knew

that they were not being mistaken for men in the way that Dominique was, so they were not gaining the prestige of men but the prestige of girls bold enough to present themselves as male. Lucal writes that “bending gender rules does not erode but rather preserves gender roles” (ibid., 785), a statement that is supported in the work of Peggy Phelan (1998), Rosalind Morris (1995), and Judith Butler (1990). According to this understanding, any subversive intent by the wannabes would appear impotent. But the wannabes were not cross-dressing and using masculine behaviors to erode gender roles. Their goal was to uphold those roles and, instead, erode their presentation of self as gendered female in terms of all of the negative social associations with being female. The wannabes don’t have the option of choosing not to do gender, but they can choose not to do femininity.

The shelter as a space and the developmental range of the young women involved may also provide insights into why the wannabes were able to make a place for themselves to “try on gender.”¹⁴ In transitional periods of life, such as the transition from girlhood to adulthood, or transitional spaces such as college or a new workplace, individuals may try on new gender roles. Trying on allows us to consider the gendered nature of specific spaces as well as “social contexts, such as race and class, and contingencies, such as control over adolescents, that shape gendered experiences” (L. Williams 2002, 31). Looking at gender displays in this way creates the possibility that the wannabes saw the shelter as a transitional space where new roles and new ways of being were possible without necessarily making a commitment to or identifying themselves through these roles. The status of the wannabes as poor Black girls offers another way to consider why trying on was appealing. The maleness they attempted to embody through dress, language, and mannerisms had the potential to elevate their social status both in the shelter (in the way that seemed to work for Dominique) and outside, where they were less objectified by the male gaze because of their rejection of the female performance. Of course, there is also the possibility that the wannabes had been “turned out” in the way described by Dominique and had decided that they had located an additional way of being and of expressing their sexuality. This is probably what occurred with Summer, and her masculine performance would thus have been a reflection of how she chose to display sexuality through gender. Nonetheless, it is important not to read any display or performance as final or wholly definitive. We are all wannabes to various degrees, and we demonstrate this through our own performances of gender; plays for prestige and respect; and attempts to locate spaces of love, care, and protection.

It is significant that the wannabes chose not to talk to me, the other staff members, or even the other residents about their visible shift. However, they did reveal that they felt less visible as female bodies in competition with other young women or as vulnerable female bodies always already the available target of the male gaze and potential verbal or physical assault. Their drag also, they believed, allowed them to appear more serious, not to be “fucked with,” like “other bubbleheads.” The lines of visibility and invisibility that the wannabes negotiated were embedded in their reading of where power is located, how it can be performed, and of the consequences of a believable performance. Their privileging of a visible masculinity afforded them freedom from unwanted attention from heterosexual males and confrontations with other young women. Visibility and power are not synonymous terms, however (Morris 1995, 570), as there is no surefire strategy for maneuvering or shapeshifting in public spaces that offers Black girls ultimate protection or ease of mobility.

The lives of young Black women living in poverty are scrutinized, evaluated, and policed through a rubric of sexuality rooted in perceptions of gender and its successful or failed performance. The young women at Fresh Start contended with a variety of confusing and contradictory scripts as they managed the intersection between Black girlhood and citizenship. Although it is possible to locate spaces of pushing back against the ways they shapeshifted the normative prescriptions for Black girls, it is vitally important that we heed Nicole Fleetwood’s warning not to misread the “refusal of dominant scripts as emancipatory or radical positions, but ones that point to a considerable discrepancy between different generations and classes of blacks in terms of what are viable forms of loving, belonging, and attaching to others” (2013, 433). The stakes for Black girls are different from those for non-Black girls and for Black women. Trying on or playing with different ways of being and identifying invites consequences for Black girls’ ability to take care of themselves, beyond those for their ability to experiment or explore in healthy ways. Black girls labor “in service of a survival project” (N. Jones 2009, 92) that requires that they “strategically choose from a variety of gender, race, and class displays depending on the situation” (ibid.). Locating Black girls’ interaction with scripts that conflate sexuality and gender within a broader political economy that seeks to subjugate them on the basis of sex and gender does not undermine the transformative potential that forms the basis of their inherently political lives, but we still need to be attuned, as researchers

and activists, to theoretically engaging in a “hasty search for resistance” (Morris 1995, 586).

Toward the end of Dominique’s stay at Fresh Start, the residents who were on the cusp of graduating from the transitional living program were the same cohort of young women who had requested that the changes in the employment curriculum include an intentional focus on longer-term residential stays to meet their needs. The six young women who stayed in the shelter for over a year formed a strong bond that enabled them to support one another with child care; finances; and the emotional strain of their relationships with friends, lovers, and families outside of the shelter. Two of these young women were cast as wannabes. At that time, when residents moved out of the Fresh Start, they were eligible for assistance in the form of a first month’s rent and deposit and the basic furnishings for a GGC-approved apartment if their living arrangements met the agency’s criterion that they were moving into their own “independent living situation”—meaning that they would be living alone or only with their children. This group of long-term residents contested the terms of the relocation assistance by insisting that they be supported in living arrangements that included moving in together as roommate pairs or networks of three or four young women, so that they might be able to sustain the relationships they had cultivated at Fresh Start and that increased their earning potential, physical safety, and emotional health. Their demands illuminated the fact that they were able to transform the institutional social service agency into a home space where they privileged relationships of reciprocity and care over almost all other measures of success. Their commitment to homemaking also revealed that the organizational emphasis on independence was predicated on the belief that the relational worlds—and, implicitly, the intimate experiences and sexual lives—of most young Black women were liabilities to their civic and economic advancement. A comment by Jafari Allen is relevant here: “Consider that at least for Black same-gender loving persons to be lesbian, bisexual, trans, or gay, or more to the point, queer, is to build loving friendships and networks of friends and family outside not only symbolic discourse in which they are always already invisibilized or muted, but also outside of cultural institutions and often once removed from extended heteropatriarchal biological families, where the violences of traumatic racialized pasts very often resound, echo, and reproduce themselves in homes where protection cannot be assured” (2009, 319).]

Amid the conversations about the relative privileges of owning desire and pleasure, exerting agency, and trying on, I urge us not to lose sight of the issues of protection, safety, care, and home as we consider the sexual lives, sexuality, and gendered possibilities for Black girls. LaTonya was able to play, offer satire, and express frustration at the paltry options for expressing sexual agency and desire in public, considering her bodily and social location. The other Fresh Start residents who chastised LaTonya and covered their heads felt the risk of simultaneously claiming bodily ownership, performing desire, and being a young Black single mother residing in a homeless shelter; thus, they experienced LaTonya's performance as audience members and unwilling coperforming bodies. The expectation of risk where "protection cannot be assured" is revealed in the Sex, Love, and Lies workshop and in the informal space of conversations in the shelter, when the young women realize that what they have done and what has happened to them and how they choose to talk about it or not can be equally harmful.¹⁵

The staff members' hyperattentiveness to Dominique and the wannabes was a concern with what bodies appeared to be and what they were assumed to be engaging in that was really not much different from Camille's investments in bodily renovations (see chapter 2) and from what self-presentation, self-fashioning, and corresponding external acts of fixing and reshaping might signal about productivity and the reproduction of families, social relationships, and earning potential. The long-term shelter residents—like LaTonya, Dominique, the participants in the sex education workshop, and the wannabes—were seeking ways to get the freedom to honor their needs and desires without being punished or prevented from continuing to explore, experiment, question, and creatively imagine themselves and other possible ways of life. How the young women of Fresh Start acted on "bodily limits" cannot be fully legible outside of these "local understandings of materiality" (Morris 1995, 575) that also encompass the possibilities for creative self-making among the girls and women in the Brown family.