

PART I Terrain

Introduction

Blackout

If there had ever been another time that was this dark, this hot, I could not remember it. The itchiness of the sweaty fabric on the couches sent most of us to the floor. We sprawled out on our backs, faces to the ceiling we could not see. The sticky carpet hardly offered more relief, but it felt good, I think, to take up more space. From the battery-powered boom box, the news commentator told us we were in the middle of what would become known as the Great Northeast Blackout of 2003. It had spread from the East Coast to parts of Ohio and Michigan, he reported, and Detroit was just one of several major urban centers covered in darkness.

“Who’s that? Y’all heard him before.” I could make out Janice’s¹ silhouette as she propped herself up on her elbows and sent her question in my direction. Her generally clear, deep voice was shaky.

I imagined the newscaster from the AM radio station sounded caught in time to these young women, who were between sixteen and twenty years old. His tone was official, uninflected, more standardized than an automated recording. The unfamiliarity of his voice added to the sense that we were in the middle of something we would be wrong to assume we understood, an event whose outcome we could not necessarily predict, even when the lights came back on.

“Yeah, he sound real old. Like he just creaked his ass out a coffin.” Danielle’s remark won a few uneasy laughs.

I knew this was my cue and that I was expected to say something explanatory, since we were in the middle of playing out our usual script: someone expressed a veiled fear, someone else made a joke, and I offered information that the group either pretended to find comforting or tore apart, depending on the circumstances. But I was too hot and too tired from spending all day figuring out an emergency blackout plan with the agency's new executive director (a plan that appeared to be failing) to step into my role. I suspected that my silence, my lounging on the floor, and my hiked-up skirt were inappropriate for the director of the Fresh Start Homeless Shelter (a pseudonym) for girls especially during a crisis. But for now I hoped that we could just be content to not know together.

It was already past 2:00 in the morning. Some birds were chirping, which made it feel even more like a temporally suspended dark day. Someone asked for a story, a scary one to fit the current mood. Clearing my throat, I sat up and turned the flashlight on under my chin to illuminate my face, the way it's been done in countless campfire dramas, and began a meandering tale. Midway into a story that included mysterious woods and alien abductions, Janice stopped me.

"If aliens dropped down here, this be the last place anybody would be checking for," she said. The choir fell in line behind her.

"Shit!

"A homeless shelter?"

"What? Detroit?"

"What?"

"You know that's right."

"Anyway," Janice continued, "the aliens would come in and be like, 'They should have told us this is where they keep all the Black girls. Never mind, let's go back to planet Zeptron,' or whatever."

With that, my story was over. Our bubbling anxiety and fantasy talk of alien abductions had at least kept us buoyant. Now the possibility of our intergalactic undesirability deflated us back to the mundane logistics of Black girl reality. I turned the flashlight back on and scanned the room to see who was still awake. The remaining girls who were uninterested in making the walk back to their hot rooms by flashlight whispered to one another as they stretched out on the floor. Restless and no longer afraid, Janice shifted from position to position on the carpet. Tina's fingers played in her hair, making long shadows on the wall that looked like alien tentacles preparing to snatch Janice's brain. I kept that thought to myself, though.

This brief dialogue, seemingly unremarkable at first, had taken a turn that was not unusual among the residents of the Fresh Start Homeless Shelter and its independent living program. When Janice and the other residents considered the meaning of events, their commentary was regularly informed by what it feels like to live in bodies that are given multiple unstable identifications. These include, as I had just heard, blackness, femaleness, youth, nationality, and poverty. But these categories are less important than what they signify about discrepancies in the value of human life. As girls who were also Black and homeless, the residents of the Fresh Start shelter were constantly reminded of where they did and did not belong, how they should and should not be seen, and the consequences for stepping outside of the boundaries meant to define and contain them as poor Black girls. How they experience their lives is thus “inherently political,”² even while their politics are inaccessible in the narratives that situate them in various, often competing, discourses. Despite these factors, the Fresh Start residents see themselves as more than either examples of resiliency or social casualties.

I write this introduction to the chapters that follow with a renewed urgency, as citizenship and the nature of the rights that it is grounded on are fiercely fought over in legislative battles and court decisions with life-or-death consequences for young Black women like the ones who appear in this book. On the public stage of mainstream and social media and in the private spaces of intimate conversations, inclusion in the U.S. collective—with the attendant protections, resources, and access that constitute social citizenship—accrues multiple and conflicting meanings. It is midsummer 2013, and the diverse U.S. population at large is debating the immediate and long-term significance of acts such as draconian laws restricting women’s reproductive rights, suppression of voters’ protections, drastic cuts to unemployment assistance, gun laws that favor perpetrators and create victims, and neoliberal processes involved in public education reform. Black girls and young women living in or close to poverty are the population most adversely affected by the implementation of these laws and reforms. Their vulnerabilities, however, are concealed by their displacement from the dialogues that swirl around them, even as these dialogues are grounded (on all sides of the debate) on intractable assumptions about Blackness, youth, gender, sexuality, and class.

Our contemporary concerns are not unprecedented, but they are unique in that they aggressively belie the belief that racism has been in decline since the election of Barack Obama to the presidency. The nation-state

known as the United States of America was built on the labor and exploitation of descendants of Africans and has been continuously legitimized through citizenship defined primarily by the racist and misogynistic exclusion of all but wealthy white male landowners. The more recent regressions represent only the latest innovations in ways to perpetuate inequalities in and through the state. The setting of this ethnography is the Fresh Start Homeless Shelter and its transitional living program in Detroit, Michigan, between 2000 and 2008.³ Yet the larger dynamics of interlocking privileges, visibilities, powers, and inchoate resistance signal consequences that extend beyond the city of Detroit and the first eight years of the twenty-first century.

The young women from Fresh Start had yet to experience Barack Obama's presidency, but they had an intuitive inkling of what the aftermath of such an event might be, given the ravages of Hurricane Katrina and the stories that disaster made plain. The early twenty-first century anxieties that pulsate around the residents of Fresh Start like a song's rhythmic refrain echo the tensions that catalyzed the shelter's emergence in 1987, late in the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Contemporary characterizations of young Black women take shape within narratives about educational reform, urban renewal, social service policy, and the academy that are generally invested in identifying the source of urban ills and contemplating their possible solutions. In all of these cases, the stories that attract mainstream attention are those that characterize the lives of Black girls as dysfunctional sites on which reform and improvement strategies should focus. Yet even these narratives are few and far between, as our national consciousness around what it may mean to be Black, young, and exceptionally vulnerable is narrowly focused on Black boys.

I want to stay attuned to both the danger and the futility of placing Black youth in discursive predicaments where they must compete for space at the bottom.⁴ The bleak statistics about both Black girls and boys reflect the material outcomes of an encompassing devaluation of blackness and the ravages of capitalism as they play out through the nexus of age, race, and gender.⁵ Black girls and boys experience these social consequences differently. But in identifying methods for protecting and improving their lives, establishing hierarchies of inequity between them obscures the broad white supremacist terrain that inflects their shared social worlds. However, the stories of young Black women that I present in this book demand that we consider why a sympathetic liberal public will readily mobilize to protest the death or threat to life of Black boys, while the plight

of Black girls fails to garner a comparable response.⁶ There is a history here. There is a historical project of recovering the pathologized Black community and the shamed Black family through the reclaiming of a fictionalized, normative Black masculinity inscribed on the bodies of Black boys—alive and, therefore, dangerous, slowly dying, or efficiently killed.

President Obama's My Brother's Keeper initiative is an example of the self-consciously anxious political moves that use a rhetoric of failed Black masculinity, primarily evinced by tropes of absentee fathers, to demonstrate the federal commitment to rescue the Black community from itself while effacing the state policies that devastate Black life.⁷ In a critique of this initiative to "build ladders of opportunity and unlock the full potential of boys and young men of color," Mary Anne Case points out that girls and women are not only excluded from the capital investment in their futures but receive "less attention and encouragement" as they continue to primarily "be defined by their relationship to men."⁸ The Black girls in this ethnography are aware of the statistics and the policies that prevent them from being seen as more than minor accomplices in the at- and high-risk construction of Black boyhood, and even they often demonstrate a worrisomely greater concern about the well-being of boys and men than about their own.

Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship is unapologetically many things, just like the young women who appear in its pages. Ultimately, however, it is a book that presents an analysis of the contradictions and failures of twenty-first-century U.S. citizenship through the critical perspective of Black girls. *Shapeshifting* describes how young Black women living in the United States engage with, confront, challenge, invert, unsettle, and expose the material impact of systemic oppression. Shapeshifting is an act, a theory, and, in this sense, a form of praxis that—although uniquely definitive of and defined by Black girls—reveals our collective vulnerabilities. In the context of a homeless shelter in postindustrial Detroit, *shapeshifting* most often means shifting the terms through which educational, training, and social service institutions attempt to shape young Black women into manageable and respectable members of society whose social citizenship is always questionable and never guaranteed, even as these same institutions ostensibly encourage social belonging.

In the pages of *Shapeshifters*, Black girls speak the truth of their lives, opening up much-needed theoretical space for interrogating how power, value, and protection are conferred and refused based on corporeal readings of individual behaviors, and how those processes are enacted on the

bodies of young Black women. The experiences of the residents of Fresh Start both inside and outside of the shelter establish the narrative arc of this book. Their reflections on why their lives unfold in the ways they do, as well as the decisions they make and the actions they do and do not take because of this, are the basis of my theoretical frame. Yet, although I center Black girls in *Shapeshifters*, I do not consider Black girls units of analysis I need to romanticize to counter negative representations. Black girls are not the problem. Their lives do not need sanitizing, normalizing, rectifying, or translating so they can be deemed worthy of care and serious consideration. I ask that instead of approaching their stories as narrative puzzles to be solved by superficially affixing them to the theoretical perspectives developed through Black feminism, queer theory, youth cultural, and girlhood studies, for example, we explore their potential to inform and transform theory and, thereby, its ripple effect on policy and material realities. I ask that instead of a one-sided reading of Black girls, we open ourselves up to a conversation with them with the full expectation that we will, at least, be changed. Ultimately, through these individual shifts, perhaps we can develop collective strategies for living fuller, self-defined lives without the threats of extinction that attempts at living in this way generally incur when you are young and Black.

The interlocutors I call into the conversation with the Fresh Start residents cover and cross various disciplines, genres, locations, and time periods and fall into the messy, overlapping categories of scholar, activist, and artist. I employ them to talk with and about young Black women because their work helps formulate a liberatory politics that begins but does not end with Black girls. Although I have confidence in this dialogue, I am humbled by the limits of the work and am grateful for the reminder of the anthropologist Jafari Allen that “scholarly work does not create everyday resistance within and survival by the most multiply vulnerable among us, but it can give light to it—helping expand recognition of those sites as legitimate political expression” (2012, 221). Allen’s words also point to the charge that Cathy Cohen persuasively presents in her game-changing article, “Deviance as Resistance.” Addressing interdisciplinary African American studies scholars, Cohen advocates for research agendas that focus on the everyday politics of the most marginalized members of the African American community to determine “how the normalizing influences of the dominant society have been challenged, or at least countered, often by those most visible as its targets” (2004, 30). A centering of infrapolitics (Scott 1985) or politics from below (Kelley 1994) as taken

up and refined by Cohen is what I intend to be the heart of *Shapeshifters*, as well as its theoretical entree, method of investigation, and ethical core. Working from this starting point, I situate both the mundane and seemingly spectacular occurrences in the lives of the Fresh Start residents as a challenge to the myths that construct and uphold social citizenship in the United States. Thus, the focus on young Black women here stems from the imperative to interrogate how categories of race, gender, and age are created and re-created to undergird systems of power and establish the social construction of Black girls and Black girlhood.⁹

Cohen's directive summons significant interlocutors to this ethnography. Interrogating structures of power as a part of developing new ways of identifying and mobilizing Black politics is work that has been undertaken by Black feminist scholars and activists (Giddings 1984; hooks 1990 and 1999; Collins 2000), particularly Black feminist anthropologists (Bolles 1996; Harrison 1997 and 2008; Mullings 1997; D. Davis 2006; Ulysse 2007) and queer theorists (Muñoz 1997; Allen 2011; R. Ferguson and Hong 2011; Judith Halberstam 2011; J. Jack Halberstam 2013). The rigor of their analyses matters most in the context of *Shapeshifters* for the book's potential to conceptualize and enact oppositional politics that redefine "the rules of normality that limit the dreams, emotions, and acts of most people." (Cohen 2004, 12). Janice and her peers present alternatives and possibilities for living in ways that honor individual humanity and, like these radical scholars, long for the vital link that can transform living on the fringe and working outside of normative ways of life to the center of a transformative politics. These shapeshifting young women reveal the destructive nature of normative ways of life that valorize white supremacy, patriarchy, and modes of production that render young Black women at best superfluous and at worst valueless. Yet, when it seems too easy to write their actions off as failures or ineffective reactions to failure is precisely when an oppositional lens is most necessary. In other words, Black girls should not be objects of critique and/or worry but should be seen as the vanguard of a political movement capable of building and creating what neoliberalism dehumanizes and destroys.

Missing the Middle

Although there are many narratives in *Shapeshifters*, Janice's is the hub from which most events and stories originate and where they intersect. It is Janice's analysis of the "missing middle" that also lays the foundation

for the concept of shapeshifting that is developed across settings and enacted at various moments in the text. Janice uses the term *missing the middle* to describe the tendency on the part of the adults she encounters in her daily life (including the Fresh Start program coordinators, teachers in her public school and training program, and caseworkers) to view her and the other young Black women in the shelter as stagnant statistics instead of human beings. In this case, as Janice explained to me, the middle includes:

The way we always have to think about how other people see us and compare it to how we see ourselves. I mean it is really who we are and what we need to do on a daily basis to survive being Black and female in this world. But, I mean, not just surviving like getting a job and getting a degree, but surviving by holding onto our truth. The truth you don't see on TV or in the papers like you should. They miss the middle because they are always focused on the outside and making assumptions about who we are. There's a lot in the middle, but who's trying to hear that?

For Janice, the missing middle is the thick, complex, richly textured, and uncategorizable aspects of the lives of young low-income Black women, and that is what constitutes their “truth,” or their legibility as fully human. Her words convey a double consciousness that is both aware of external assumptions made about Black girls and attuned to the fact that Black girls create their own measures of success, health, and happiness. One of the key analytic gains of Black feminism has been what Janice calls missing the middle—or, in other words, compelling representations and theorizations of the lives of Black girls to place Black girls experiences “at the center of analysis” (Collins 2000, 44). Missing the middle is a statement about intersectionality, multiple jeopardy,¹⁰ and the peculiar position of Black girls in the United States. Missing the middle speaks to Black girls’ understandings of their rights as citizens and how other people abuse these rights. The missing middle is grounded in Black girls’ identification of the complicated interplay of external and self-evaluations fueled by the representational work of labels and tropes hurled at them from multiple points of origin. One of these points is the nexus of intersecting discourses erected around youth culture, girlhood, low-income black communities, and social mobility in the United States.

Janice is the central figure in *Shapeshifters* for several reasons. She was one of the first young women I met when I came as a volunteer to the

larger social service organization, Give Girls a Chance, that housed the Fresh Start Shelter, and we quickly developed an intimate bond. At the time, she was a participant in the Community Outreach Program, but she would eventually participate in all three Give Girls a Chance programs, which gave her an experiential overview of the entire organization.¹¹ In addition, Janice's family included her younger sister Crystal and an extended network of female cousins who provided an accessible and willing group of young Black women who were surprisingly diverse in terms of aspirations and life philosophies although they were from the same biological family. As I became closer to Janice and her teenage sister and cousins, I also got to know her grandmother, her mother, and her aunts. The adult women in the Brown family provide a historical grounding for the stories of the girls.

The Problem with Youth: Youth Culture and Girlhood Studies

Popular social commentary and academic research on children; youth; adolescents; teenagers; the Me Generation; and Generations X, Y, and now Z¹² reflect the relationship between the ideas and images used to categorize young people and larger social trends, economic anxieties, and political agendas. The concepts of *children* and *childhood* as an identity and a period of time distinct from adulthood emerged as early as the fifteenth century. According to Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine, the “mythical condition” of childhood grew and became part of the collective consciousness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as mass schooling was introduced in society (1998, 3). With the rise of industrial capitalism and the expansion of the time thought necessary for children to be engaged in schooling, the transitional period of adolescence was born. Adolescence, as a purely distinct and conceptually loaded period apart from childhood that is similar to other social categories, has been variously called imaginary, made-up, and invented due to the diverse ways in which definitions of adulthood¹³ have been manipulated to fit the interests of dominant ideology and the prevailing economic structure.

Childhood—encompassing a younger age range than adulthood and connected to the ideas of domesticity, motherhood, and safety—has been crafted as a time for growth and development, for innocence and dependence. In this vein, children are perceived as being in need of care and attention that are grounded in the intentions of guiding and protecting. Adolescence, in contrast, “was invented to create the space between the innocence of

childhood and the realities of adulthood” (Skelton and Valentine 1998, 4). During the early twentieth century, adolescence as a monolithic and slippery category of unidentified youths started to cleave into different subcultures, according to the work of researchers concerned with tracking and ensuring what they saw as proper transitions into adulthood. Stanley Hall (1904) demonstrates the early concern with defining the differences among young people, so that the differences are correlated to perceived threats posed by nonwhite youth to the social order.

It is fair to say that research on adolescence has largely been written from the perspective of fear. Hall’s work betrays the tension of straining to protect middle-class values by controlling and containing the working and lower classes, with the delineated boundaries of adolescence a critical part of how value is attributed and social responsibility assigned or abdicated. Throughout the history of academic work on youth, the idea of control and containment is a recurring theme. Youth increasingly represent middle-class anxieties, and the particular subpopulation of youth in need of systematic subjugation changes to meet the prevailing embodiment of racialized fears and the concern with enforcing class- and gender-based boundaries. Thus, the category of adolescence, like those of race and gender, is essential to defining and limiting citizenship. Black girls are, therefore, forced to confront their supposed inferiority and deviance on multiple intersecting and continually shifting social planes—adolescence being one of the critical places of intersection. There are overlapping and mutually reinforcing similarities between the ideologies surrounding young people and the practices enacted to control them and the ideologies used to monitor and contain the lives of Blacks (especially Black women) through codes of respectability and boundaries of exclusion. These intersections complicate the ways in which young Black women mediate experiences in the public and private spheres.

The field of girlhood studies has questioned the changing nature of citizenship for young women who are defined primarily by their status as both female and adults in the making. Scholars across disciplinary orientations writing in this field have addressed the historical absenting of the experiences of girls in the context of youth cultural discourses, both in the academy and in popular culture. Part of their work has been to document the evolution of the idea of girlhood as a specific period of time in the life cycle of women, and to present the evolution of girlhood studies as an academic intervention that questions the privileging of boyhood

and masculinity in youth studies (see, for example, Ward and Benjamin 2004; Caron 2011). Although youth in general are seen as “scapegoats for social unrest, social change, and civic disintegration” (Harris 2004, 65), in more recent scholarship on young women, the modern girl emerges as a contemporary problem, and the discourse on girls and their cultural spaces as a commentary on modern life. As Caroline Caron states, “the spectacular modes of girl culture which, then and now, raise concerns about girls today are in this sense always part of debates about citizenship and culture” (2011, 77).

The range of concerns addressed through girlhood studies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries includes interrogating the idea of a universal girl conceived as white, American, and middle class and burdened with the baggage of internalizing the negative connotations of her marginalized gender status. The link between girls and women has received much less attention than the study of girls as a unique and “separate entity” (Ward and Benjamin 2004, 23). Bullying between girls and “mean girl” culture, girls’ navigation of institutions from family to school and religion, girls as consumers and producers of popular culture, girls’ embodiment and the disciplining of their bodies, and sexuality are the social arenas that are most frequently under investigation. For many of these subjects, ethnography has become the preferred methodology to use in investigating the particularities of girls’ lives. Although revealing the texture and complexity of girls’ experiences is the underlying goal of girlhood research across these topics, we can still discern a dichotomy for young women that Anita Harris defines as the “can-do” or “at-risk” girls (2004, 9). Through this binary comes the rise of the über-productive self-made girl of the twenty-first century and the continuation of the trope of the perpetually at-risk girl rendered unproductive and, ultimately, surplus by a combination of factors such as her race, class, geographic location, and sexuality. These are generally discussed in terms of another dichotomy: either her bad choices or external structural failures. Harris illuminates the ways in which funding efforts support initiatives that capitalize on the leadership capacities and civic engagement of girls rather than addressing the circumstances many young women face, such as concerns for their bodily safety, physical and emotional health, and overall ability to be cared for and care for themselves. State support for the ideological and material construction of this self-made girl additionally valorizes the previously at-risk girl who becomes a success through her own fortitude and hard work, despite the array of obstacles she might face.

Shapeshifters is concerned with populating the space around the illegible Black girl in youth, cultural, and girlhood studies. I find Harris's dichotomy useful for thinking about how the Black girls in this text occupy both categories without necessarily receiving the benefits of valorization (the can-do girl) or protection (the at-risk girl) implied through the binary. The Fresh Start residents are officially defined as embodying and managing dangers that make them risky, at risk, and high risk. At the same time, social institutions charge them with transforming their circumstances, so they exemplify Harris's can-do girls. Their at-risk status is a baseline requirement for inclusion in the Fresh Start shelter and other social service institutions. Yet their actions in these institutions reflect the fact that their "can-do girl" behavior is, in many ways, part of the actions they must perform to insure their livelihood. The self-made can-do girl Harris describes is both supported by and supports the state through her leadership skills, advocacy for the state and community, and ability to act as a good consumer citizen.¹⁴ However, the labor of the Black girls in *Shapeshifters* is not legitimized by the state and is, in fact, categorized as detrimental to the normative practices that constitute the state.

Urban Ethnography and the Missing Black Girl

For over half a century, Black girls have been the absent referent in urban ethnographies in the social sciences, which instead have been chiefly invested in explaining the life patterns of poor young and adult Black males. During the height of the civil rights movement and continuing into the following decades, both federal agencies and individual sociologists and anthropologists (often working in tandem) studied Black men living in poverty in rapidly deindustrializing inner cities as the main characters in the story of urban decline and social disorder. The concerns about urban poverty, migration, and the resulting shifts in neighborhood composition were also concerns about the stability within and reproduction of the male-headed nuclear family and middle-class status.

St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (1945) marked the beginning of a social science tradition that continues into the present of studying the Black inhabitants of the Bronzeville area in Chicago's South Side (Wilson 1987). The migration of southern Blacks to Chicago illuminated the internal ruptures in the Bronzeville Black community as Blacks from the lower, middle, and upper classes lived in fairly close geographic proximity. The chapter titles in *Black Metropolis* ("Style of Living—Upper

Class,” “Lower Class: Sex and Family,” “The World of the Lower Class,” “The Middle-Class Way of Life,” and finally “Advancing the Race”) reveal the assumption that bridging the gaps between the classes in the Black community, made visible through lifestyles and behaviors, could lead to the “advancement of the race.” In one of the text’s most compelling passages, Drake and Cayton recount the internal monologue of an upper-middle-class physician responding to a house call in a lower-class community where a woman has stabbed a man in a tenement building:

For a moment, Dr. Macguire felt sick at his stomach. “Are those my people?” he thought. “What in the hell do I have in common with them? This is ‘The Race’ we’re always spouting about being proud of.” He had a little trick for getting back on an even keel when such doubts assailed him. He just let his mind run back over the “Uncle Tomming” he had to do when he was a Pullman porter; the turndown he got when he wanted to interne [*sic*] at the University of Chicago hospital; the letter from the American Medical Association rejecting his application for membership; the paper he wrote for a white doctor to read at a Mississippi medical conference which no Negroes could attend. Such thoughts restored his sense of solidarity with “The Race.” “Yeah, I’m just a nigger, too,” he mumbled bitterly. (1945, 566)

After Dr. Macguire has finished assisting the injured man, he finds himself in conversation with the small crowd that has gathered: “‘I’m gonna be a doctor, I am,’ a small, self-confident urchin spoke up. The crowd tittered and a young woman said, ‘That’s real cute, ain’t it? You be a good one too, just like Doc Macguire.’ Dr. Macguire smiled pleasantly. An elderly crone mumbled, ‘Doctor? Humph! Wid a hophead daddy and a booze houn’ mammy, how he ever gonna be any doctah? He bettah get his min’ on a WPA shovel.’ Everybody laughed” (ibid., 566–67). I quote from *Black Metropolis* at length because *Shapeshifters* wrestles with questions regarding race, social mobility, and social reproduction similar to the ones indicated here. The event described here also shows the key themes of culture and community transformation that appear in urban ethnography from the time of Drake and Cayton’s study to more contemporary research on U.S. cities. Although Dr. Macguire expresses frustrated disdain for lower-class Blacks whose behavior he finds not just crass but potentially harmful to all Blacks, he quickly reminds himself that his credentials and elevated educational status do not protect him from being Black in the context of white supremacy. He is, in his own words, still “just a nigger, too.” A young boy, watching

Macguire work, confidently proclaims that he will be a doctor one day. A cynical woman from the small crowd that's gathered doesn't hesitate to remind the boy, and everyone else in earshot, that his class status and, perhaps more importantly for her, the behavior of his parents will insure that his dream goes unfulfilled. Her comment about a more realistic choice being employment through the WPA is made even more relevant by the fact the Works Progress Administration, a product of New Deal legislation that employed out-of-work men, funded Drake and Cayton's research for *Black Metropolis*.

For the most part, the second half of the narrative, which addresses the question of what is likely to happen to the lower-class Black boy who dreams of becoming a doctor, has received a great deal of attention from social scientists, policy makers, educators, social service workers, and journalists—who have remained concerned with this question since the 1940s. Whether invested in maintaining hierarchies that make it nearly impossible for low-income Black youth to achieve educational goals that lead to economic stability, or concerned with disrupting interlocking systems of inequity that prevent social mobility, people in these fields share an underlying assumption: that normative markers of success and respectability should be the desired outcome. The identifiable problem is painted as the elusive nature of success and mobility in the lives of poor Blacks and has resulted in what Robin D. G. Kelley calls a “cultural and ideological warfare that continues to rage over black people in the inner city as social problems” (1997, 4). Thus, the task becomes determining either how to fix the Black community or how to challenge persistent inequalities so that Black children's dreams can be realized.

What has received far less critical attention in ethnographies about urban Black communities is Dr. Macguire's ambivalence toward the utility of normative markers of success for Black Americans in the first place. The doctor sees himself as distinct and separate from the lower-class Blacks in Bronzeville until he reminds himself that regardless of their material differences, he and they are united by their status as only contingent and partial citizens because they are Black. In *Shapeshifters*, I am interested in using the lens of contemporary Black girls living in Detroit to take up the contradictions of American dreaming and social mobility expressed in Drake and Cayton's narrative. The young women of Fresh Start are charged with believing in meritocracy, in thinking that despite the realities of homelessness and undereducation, a disciplined can-do attitude can transform their lives and put them on the road to economic independence and pro-

ductive citizenship. Yet they recognize that no matter what they achieve in education and employment, their viability as worthy citizens hinges primarily on their Blackness and gender. They understand that being at risk is a characterization that cannot be easily erased by their efforts and good intentions.

It is also important to pay attention to gender in the *Black Metropolis* story and to ask how the notion of success in low-income Black communities is gendered. The doctor and his hopeful imitator are both male. The perpetrator of the stabbing attack is a woman, and her victim a man. Although this incident occurred two decades before Daniel Patrick Moynihan published *The Negro Family* (1965), we can imagine this incident as a classic example that he would have found useful for condemning Black families and, in particular, Black women. The poor Black woman, enraged and apparently inebriated, slashes a man who is not her husband but her lover. The Black doctor hesitates to make a house call because he is in no mood for the chaos he predicts he will encounter and the overwhelming likelihood that the woman will not be able to pay him for his services. The doctor represents upper-middle-class ascendancy not just through his title and occupation, but also because of his gender. And the community's hopes for the future are embodied in a boy who articulates his desires, only to be mocked by a cynical older woman.

Drake and Cayton pull this narrative out of their extensive, rigorous research and nonfictional ethnographic analysis. I am not interested in a critique of their work as much as I am intrigued by how this scene brilliantly represents the hopes and fears of state investments in constructing the Black family as the dysfunctional root of Black poverty. A man has been stabbed and a young boy publicly humiliated. The Black women's actions here are dangerous, even life threatening, and also mean-spirited and malicious.¹⁵ Without knowing the subtext and rich histories of the people involved in this scene, we find the women taking shape as the embodiment of the hysterical and sexually promiscuous Jezebel and the sharp-tongued, insensitive Sapphire. The men and boys here are allowed internal turmoil, conflicted compassion, and the ability to envision and desire a life beyond the ghetto. It appears that Black boys can dream of becoming successful Black men only if they can survive Black women.¹⁶

As the tropes of Jezebel and Sapphire, the sharp-tongued, rude, and malicious Black woman, expanded to make room for the controlling images of the bad Black mother of the 1960s and 1970s and, eventually, the 1980s welfare queen, social anxieties remained firmly entrenched

in concerns about Black men's viability as economic providers and Black boys' ability to safely navigate schools, homes, and the street. During the social unrest of the mid- to late 1960s and rebellions in cities like Detroit, Newark, and the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, poor Blacks living in inner-city neighborhoods were now fully visible as active oppositional actors willing to lose their lives for the rights of citizenship. The Du Boisian query, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (1903, 1), took on an even weightier meaning as federal and local elected officials, aided by the work of social scientists, anxiously clamored to define and ultimately constrain a Black population perceived as an undisciplined and a particularly dangerous strand of the civil rights movement.

Elliot Liebow (1967) conducted fieldwork during this historical period among underemployed Black men whom he called street corner men, living in the Washington, D.C., area. This demographic group of underskilled and undereducated men would later be defined as the underclass, a term marking them as stagnant and intractably gripped by poverty. As Liebow explores his interlocutors' relationship to work and family, he finds that Black women form the backdrop in Black men's lives. In keeping with the tradition of the "historiography of race in America," Black men are presented "as the central characters in a history of exclusion" (R. Ferguson 2004, vi). The overwhelming focus on Black men and boys in urban ethnographic research beyond Liebow's study is clear across fields covering topics that range from managing street behavior in a gentrifying community (Anderson 1990) to understanding underground illegal economies (Bourgois 1995; Bergmann 2008) and exploring the criminalization of Black youth in school systems (A. Ferguson 2001). Much of this work has transformed the way we talk about race and community change as well as our understanding of how critical the complexities of identity and identification are to everyday acts of survival. Yet aside from the pioneering work of Joyce Ladner (1972) and Carol Stack (1970), young Black women were virtually left out of the equation until very recently, when research in what can be categorized as Black girlhood studies began to appear.

Shapeshifters, as well as all other ethnographic work that centers on Black girls, owes a debt to the work of Ladner and Stack. In particular, Ladner's research in St. Louis with young women living in the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects informs the methodological spirit and underlying theoretical intent of my work. Black girls are nascent dangerous Black women. They emerge as the partially hidden fulcrum at the center of spectacular Black urban tragedies, and their failures are corporeally located and inscribed.

Whether in judgments that they are unproductive and their sexuality is abhorrent or in their placement in homes and neighborhoods where their inability to conform to norms of mainstream domesticity and an aesthetic of white femininity becomes the crux of family and community demise, low-income young Black women are always already defined as the problematic given. Ladner was primarily committed to providing an analysis of low-income Blacks' lives that served as an intervention in discussions about young Black women that were based on the deviancy model. The Black girls in her work are not measured against a white girl norm. In addition, Ladner conscientiously positions herself in the text and is transparent about her own experiences growing up Black and female. One of her central goals was to present the complex humanity of Black girlhood that was missing in previous ethnographic accounts of Black urban life.

It is interesting to note that more recent ethnographies in the area of Black girlhood studies narrow the focus by concentrating on particular concerns in Black girls' lives. The various foci of these works testify to the generative groundwork laid by Ladner and Stack (even if these authors are unacknowledged in the texts) and also reflect what the researchers identify as the most urgent and compelling issues for Black girls. The most prominent ethnographies about Black girls address the following two major areas of concern: negotiating violence, from domestic and street violence to involvement in gangs (J. Miller 2008; N. Jones 2010; Ness 2010); and Black girls as consumers and producers of culture (Chin 2001; LaBennett 2011), with their relationship to hip hop a significant subcategory of study (Sharpley-Whiting 2007; B. Love 2012). *Shapeshifters* is clearly in conversation with these works on Black girlhood. However, I broaden my focus with the understanding that these and other significant areas in the lives of Black girls can be subsumed under the work of exploring Black girls' navigation and practice of citizenship. In other words, citizenship and everyday acts of political engagement undergird all aspects of Black girlhood.¹⁷

The theoretical lines that I follow, extend, and diverge from are largely located in Black feminist anthropology and women of color feminism. These epistemologies have always trafficked in the unknown and the unworthy as a way to identify possibilities for living better and more fully. Thus, they have always interrogated the nature of citizenship and the terms of inclusion that devalue the lives of people who are identified as nonwhite, nonmale, nonheterosexual, or poor. In *Shapeshifters*, I am interested in how partial and conditional citizenship both shapes and is manipulated by the agency of low-income young Black women in the United States,

as well as in the ways in which young Black women construct theoretical frameworks that are echoed by but not always recognizable in women of color feminism.

The Site: Give Girls a Chance and the Fresh Start Shelter

Give Girls a Chance (GGC) helps homeless and high-risk girls and young women avoid violence, teen pregnancy, and exploitation and helps them explore and access the support, resources, and opportunities necessary to be safe, to grow strong, and to make positive choices in their lives. The Fresh Start shelter is part of this larger social service organization. GGC is a nonprofit, private, community-based social service agency located in southwest Detroit. Its gender-specific services are designed to meet the developmental needs of girls, young women, and women, and it achieves this goal through three core programs: the Fresh Start shelter and Transition to Independent Living (TIL) Program, the Early Start Program, and the Community Outreach Program. The Fresh Start shelter was the first program that GGC established. In fact, Fresh Start and GGC were synonymous in the years before the two other programs were implemented. Even now, most people in the community think only of the shelter when they hear the name Give Girls a Chance. Fresh Start, however, is much more than a warming center for a temporary reprieve from the streets. The goal of the shelter is to provide support, training, and guidance to young women aged fifteen to twenty-two who are homeless and labeled “high risk,” with the goal of helping them transition out of homelessness and into what the organization called “independent living situations.” When I started volunteering at GGC in 2000, the shelter capacity was twelve beds. The shelter moved to a new building in December 2002, when I became its director, and the capacity increased to nineteen beds. At the same time, young women with children in their care became eligible for housing in the shelter. By the time I had been the director of the shelter for nine months, its capacity had reached twenty-nine beds, including five for women with children, and it was raising funds to realize the capacity goal for the new building that had been outlined in a capital campaign, to forty beds.

In addition to the increase in resident capacity, which necessitated an increase in staff to meet the state licensing requirements for staff-to-resident ratio, the biggest change for the shelter with the move to the new building was the addition of infants and young children. Young women who came to Fresh Start were initially tracked into the shelter compo-

ment of the program, meaning that they were considered residents only for emergency stays of two weeks, while staff members assessed their individual circumstances and worked with them to set immediate goals. Some of those who stayed for two weeks or less decided that they did not want to participate in a long-term program or were in need of only temporary support. A majority of these short-term residents were minors who, with the intervention of Child Protective Services, were reunited with their parents or primary caregivers. The TIL Program was designed to train young women in employment readiness, help them acquire life skills, and guide them in educational planning so that they could live on their own and avoid future homelessness. Two program coordinators implemented the curriculum by facilitating group workshops and working one-on-one with each resident to provide academic tutoring and job search support. The program also employed four caseworkers, one to work with each of the following resident populations: minors (those younger than eighteen), pregnant and parenting young women, emergency-stay residents, and adult participants in the TIL Program. The day-to-day operations of the shelter—which involved the chore schedule, meal times, curfew adherence, group attendance, house meetings, and so forth—were all monitored by the resident advisors.

Although there was no enforced time limit for stay in the shelter, the average stay while I was there was six to eight weeks, with the shortest time being a few hours and the longest recorded uninterrupted stay being seventeen months.¹⁸ When you consider what this means on a practical level, it is a miraculously brief amount of time for an adolescent young woman (or any individual, for that matter) living in one of the most economically depressed cities in the United States to transition from homelessness and unemployment to stable housing, a job that pays enough to live on, and substantial progress toward educational goals. There was, undoubtedly, something powerfully effective at work here for young women to succeed in these transitions on such a regular basis. Part of my interest in Fresh Start was rooted in figuring out what was working in these young women's lives and how they defined a successful transition.

Who Seeks Shelter?

The Fresh Start shelter is a productive site for charting how racialized self-improvement mandates gain credence from the historical construction of Black femininity in the United States, and how they are sustained through

contemporary attempts to fix low-income young Black women as part of an eternal underclass. More than 92 percent of the young women who sought shelter and other services at Fresh Start were African American—the majority of them defined themselves as Black. Young women come to Fresh Start because of a variety of overlapping circumstances that threaten their ability to find safety and protection in the broadest sense of the words.

The typical Fresh Start resident was a young woman who identified herself as Black or African American, was between nineteen and twenty-one years old, and had a child younger than three years old. She called the shelter hotline or showed up in person to talk to an intake caseworker about gaining admittance into the shelter. Typically, she had become homeless in one of the following ways: being put out of her home by her mother, who believed the daughter to be the cause of tension with a new man entering the home, such as the mother's live-in boyfriend; having to leave home when it became too crowded with various relatives and friends; having exhausted her extended network of friends whose homes were available for couch surfing; leaving an abusive relationship with no other options for making a home; and having no family to turn to after leaving foster care or the juvenile justice system. Although some young women came to Fresh Start after aging out of foster care, young women who were current wards of the state via either foster care or the juvenile justice system could not be admitted to the shelter.

In terms of employment and education, the typical Fresh Start resident dropped out of high school in tenth grade and was working on her General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Her employment record was brief and spotty, and most of her work experience was in the service industry.¹⁹ Although she may have entered Fresh Start with hostile feelings toward her parents and other relatives, throughout her stay one of her goals was to reunite and build a more sustainable relationship with her family. Her other goals included earning her GED and entering a program in which she could attain a certificate in the health care field prior to pursuing a college education,²⁰ finding an apartment that she could afford to live in on her own, and eventually starting her own business. After five or six months, she had either found a job and affordable housing, reconnected and moved back in with family members, or become frustrated with the program's structure and discharged herself—usually returning to the shelter within less than a month.

There have, of course, been people in the shelter who differed from this typical resident. Some young women identified themselves as Caucasian, Arab American, Mexican American, or Puerto Rican. Some young women entered the shelter after having earned a bachelor's degree; others hadn't advanced beyond the fourth grade and had difficulty writing their name. While I was the director, there was a marked increase in the number of functionally illiterate women in the shelter. There was also a growing population of young women who were diagnosed as manic depressive. The program struggled to provide appropriate care for these young women, since staff members were not adequately trained in severe remedial adult education or in the type of clinical psychiatric care that many of these residents required. In addition, many of Fresh Start's partnering community health centers that traditionally worked with these populations closed their doors due to cuts in state and federal funding.

As much as the girls talked about "getting out" and "moving on," they often returned to the shelter to visit, check in, report on their progress, and get the material assistance and counseling many of them still required for months after their official departure. The Fresh Start shelter both mimicked and redefined home for these young women, as evinced by the complicated emotions that they and staff members had for each another and the ambiguity surrounding both groups' perceptions of the shelter as a place of safety, stability, and love.

The Early Start and Community Outreach Programs

As noted above, the other two programs that were a part of the GGC organization were the Early Start Program and the Community Outreach Program. The Early Start Program resembled traditional after-school programs in that it provided academic tutoring, recreational and physical fitness activities, performing and visual art opportunities, workshops on topics ranging from sex and dating to making papier-mâché masks, and counseling and case management to girls and young women between the ages of five and twenty. Participants in this program were identified as at risk.

The Community Outreach Program hired high-risk young women as peer educators to work on street outreach teams and trained them to educate other high-risk young women about a range of behaviors considered unhealthy, in addition to encouraging these young women—in a version

of the self-made can-do girl—to be leaders in their school, home, and community. As many as five street outreach teams were in operation at one time, with four to seven peer educators on each team. These teams included the Care project, which focused on issues related to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; the Community Justice project, whose audience was young women transitioning out of the juvenile justice system; the Move Experiment,²¹ which used dance, poetry, music, and other modes of creative self-production by the peer educators to reach out to other young women; the Free Project, which focused outreach efforts on young people identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, or questioning; and the first peer educator outreach team to be established, which was simply known as street outreach. All of the outreach teams planned and facilitated trainings, events, and workshops that took place in institutions like schools, recreational centers, churches, and other social service agencies.

Unlike the other outreach program employees, the street outreach workers rode around with their staff coordinator in an agency van, searching the streets of Detroit for teen girls to provide information on where to access community resources if they needed support or assistance, how to avoid dangerous or high-risk situations, and what services they might be eligible for through GGC. Watching the street outreach teens at work was always exciting. Their education and instruction of other young women happened on sidewalks, at bus stops, and at the entrances of parks where boys and girls mingled after school. With only a few critical seconds to make a positive impression and establish trust and rapport, these peer educators had to develop a unique demeanor that combined boldness and sensitivity. Their work was a more formalized version of the street education that young women engage in everyday—sharing wisdom, passing along warnings and opinions tempered by experience, and showing loving care to other young people whose faces reflected their own.

Although Fresh Start, Early Start, and Community Outreach were different programs, they were all housed under the larger GGC organizational banner. The administrative staff of all programs held weekly leadership team meetings to make plans and solve problems across programs and to chart the organization's overall trajectory. Girls and young women had the option of participating in all three programs if they met the age criteria. For example, Fresh Start residents could be hired as peer educators if that work did not interfere with their school or other training obligations. Peer educators from the Community Outreach Program often attended employment and wellness workshops facilitated by the shelter staff. It was com-

mon for two or even all three of the programs to share grants and to collectively report on their progress toward grant goals. When GGC moved into one large building, the lines between the programs were further blurred as staff members and young women from all programs shared classroom space and meeting rooms. Once a month, an agencywide meeting was held, at which each program director reported on the program's successes and challenges, the finance director reviewed the budget, and staff members were led in a team-building exercise. The site for this book is the Fresh Start shelter and its location in the GGC organization, in the city of Detroit—which in turn was entrenched in the spatial and ideological structure of the U.S. political economy. These nested sites overlap in *Shapeshifters*.

Traditions and Genealogies

To be without documentation is too unsustaining, too spontaneously ahistorical, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but my future as well. So I have been picking through the ruins for my roots.

—*Patricia J. Williams* (1998, 5)

Noliwe Rooks states that “concerns for the dynamics of space and power are a common thread” (2005, 2) in the academic and artistic work by and about Black women since the nineteenth century. From Hazel Carby’s (1992) pioneering research on the moral panic in northern cities inspired by the inclusion of Black women migrants, to Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1996) poetic discussion of the ways in which women of color enact and imagine space without deferring to the restrictions of boundaries and borders so that they become adept jugglers, the act of shifting spaces is a critical grounding concept (see Davis and Craven 2013a). Black women are, out of necessity, inherently shapeshifters. Thus, understanding the ways in which everyday Black women make sense of their lives by theorizing the present and imagining the future is essential for supporting ways of living that resist the dehumanization implied in normative scripts, that shapeshift, and that offer us opportunities to interrogate the texture of citizenship for Black girls. Moving from this standpoint as an anthropologist in the context of this ethnography means paying close and generous attention to the quotidian spaces of meaning making that Black girls enliven and invent.²² Black girls’ presence changes the possibilities for what

can occur in public and private spaces while also requiring us to see and understand these spaces differently. I am interested in the theories and methods Black girls use to shift the shape of spaces that restrict and punish them as well as those that offer care and support.

There are guides along this shapeshifting journey. Black feminists and radical women of color theorists across disciplines, genres, and time periods cleared the way for these theoretical travels. In addition, and more specifically, Black feminist anthropologists such as Leith Mullings, A. Lynn Bolles, and Dána-Ain Davis who take seriously the lives of Black women as resources for new theoretical currents in anthropology, critical race, and feminist theory provide not only theoretical frames of reference but also models for methodology predicated fundamentally, and most importantly, on care.²³ It is this type of careful work and paying this deep attention that allows for the sorts of transformation in anthropology that constitutes what Faye Harrison (2008) calls “reworking” the field. I agree with Kelley (1997) and others who assert that the terrain of culture is an important site of struggle across the Black community. However, the culture work and cultural remapping produced by Black girls is a space of possibility that has yet to be fully investigated. Anthropologists working in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States (Hannerz 1969; Lewis 1970) approached the relationship between culture and social inequality in cities in ways that were expanded and refined in research by urban anthropologists (Gregory 1998; Low 2002; Davila 2004 and 2012; Susser 2012) who were more centrally concerned with how people work within and through culture to reshape city spaces. *Shapeshifters* positions Black girls in the context of these anthropological inquiries into the dynamics of place making.

Shapeshifting

In writing that “the material world is a house that is only as safe as flesh” (2006, ix), Katherine McKittrick acknowledges the interconnectedness of geography and humanness, space and bodies, cities and people, and their practices of mutual constitution. Neither the theoretical link between place and personhood nor the attention paid to Black women’s different experiences within and reordering of space are new subjects of analysis. What is uncharted territory are the theoretical frame and embodied methodologies that low-income young Black women use to read and respond to the evaluations of their social value—evaluations having implications

that unsettle the notion of unified and knowable identities and the presumed stability of geographic spaces. The history of Detroit tells a complicated story of displacement within urban deindustrialization and contemporary attempts to revitalize the city. In the discourse that surrounds the rebuilding of inner cities, the predominantly Black and low-income populace is often constructed as an undifferentiated mass with little or no productive agency. For example, in Detroit, political leaders—whether corrupt and self-interested or well-intentioned but fatally flawed²⁴—are situated against a backdrop of alternately drone-like or mindlessly hostile Black residents who are presumed to have the political representation they deserve.

It is essential that efforts to counter and complicate the representation of Black inner-city residents, and Black youth in particular, take seriously not only how the category of Black girl takes shape within the larger context of national politics but also, and more important, how Black girls develop their own rhetorical performances and creative strategies—essentially, how Black girls establish their own politics of the body. The context of urban space continually emerged as a primary organizer of the ways young women in Detroit considered who they were as individuals and how they were seen and treated as a collective under the banner of Black girl. Because of this perception of individual and collective identity as inextricable in many ways from space (in terms of both the tangible and geographic as well as the rhetorical and representational), the relationship between Detroit and the making of Black girls across and within class differentials was a significant dynamic to explore in *Shapeshifters*.

Black girls suggest that we take up the challenge posed to all of us by M. Jacqui Alexander to think of ourselves as “refugees of a world on fire” (2005, 264). This is an acknowledgment of the dynamics of social processes and the potential held in our capacity to embrace, rather than fight against, our inevitable and perpetual displacement. We should, in fact, allow ourselves—like the young women at Fresh Start—to use our displacement as a starting point for regeneration and the creation of new lifeworlds and spaces that affirm our collective humanity. As such refugees, committed not to inclusion but to creation, we get closer to Cohen’s transformational politics, which is a “politics that does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions or normative social relationships but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws that make these institutions and relationships oppressive” (2009, 29).

Shapeshifting is a term that appears in science fiction when beings shift form—most often from human to animal or extraterrestrial entity.²⁵ *Shapeshifting* is also a term used to talk about the mutable nature of molecules and genes, the transformations of self and spirit that occur during rituals, changing energy fields during hypnosis, and computer coding. The meaning of *shapeshifting* that I find to be most usefully aligned with the cultural work of Black girls, oddly enough, comes from an introduction to a series of logic puzzles that explains how to cognitively approach resolving the puzzles. Here *shapeshifting* is defined as a method used to “find solutions, master concentration, recall, recontextualize ideas, and map out plans” (Schreiber 2012). The emphasis on memory and mapping is significant because they reflect the ways in which young Black women mobilize history, whether officially documented or bricolaged through recall and desire, to give new meaning to social contexts that engender cartographic capacities beyond particular physical or ideological sites. The shapeshifting practices of young Black women compel us to move from where we are and how we see and talk about our globalized neocolonial realities to a “society whose outcomes cannot be fully known” (Purcell 2014, 145).²⁶ I have chosen not to hyphenate *shapeshifters* as an aesthetic nod to the mutually constructing and mutually disruptive relationship between the contexts and the shifts within them that are catalyzed by Black girls. They touch and reciprocate.

Choreography

Perhaps because I trained for most of my young adult life as a professional ballet and contemporary dancer, the term *choreography* seems to me to be the most apt descriptor of young Black women’s interactions with the institutions and practices of the state. Choreography is concerned in a very fundamental sense with the ordering of bodies in space. Choreography is shapeshifting made visible. Choreography is embodied meaning making, physical story telling, affective physicality, and an intellectualized response to the question of how movement might narrate texts that are not otherwise legible. Social choreography, as performed by the young Black women in this book, privileges and celebrates the instability and flexibility of identity in variously configured locations that are more than “merely containers for human complexities and social relations” (McKittrick 2006, xi). Choreography, in its most radical sense, can disrupt and

discredit normative reading practices that assess young Black women's bodies as undesirable, dangerous, captive, or out of place.

Choreography suggests that there is a map of movement or plan for how the body interacts with its environment, but it also suggests that by the body's placement in a space, the nature of that space changes. In the world of concert dance, choreography was something that, as paid dancers, we had to learn and master, using our bodies to express the intent and feeling a choreographer embedded in a sequence of steps. Being able to pull this off required a combination of virtuosity in physical technique and affective manipulation—or, in other words, the ability to execute the steps and infuse them with feeling. While I was dancing with Ailey II,²⁷ I would often hear the mandate “Stay in your body!” hurled at dancers during rehearsals. Until my recent analysis of young Black women's relationship to their bodies and space, I did not understand what the imperative to stay in the body could fully convey. Staying in the body asks that the dancer move from a place of intuitive knowing that allows movement to both feel and look organic. It also means moving from the center of your body and extending outward rather than allowing your extremities or the technical demands of the movement to finally dictate your body's journey in space. Exceptional dancers are able to give the impression that they are deeply in their bodies as they transcend it—carving stories, meanings, memories, and images in space that surely emanate from the physical being, but somehow appear to make the body irrelevant, despite its virtuosity.

The young women in *Shapeshifters* stay in their bodies to rewrite the socially constructed meanings shackled to them. The body, like the notion of home for these young women, can be by turns a space of safety and protection or one of instability and expulsion. In the body as well as in home spaces, the ways of establishing inclusion are inherently unpredictable for young Black women. They are aware that if they rely on socially determined assessments to define their self-worth, they would be exiled from their own bodies and any home spaces they might establish for themselves—a state of eternal homelessness. Young Black women propose the possibility that the body may be the space to which we may finally come home, or where we make a new one. Staying in the body, therefore, may very well mean moving in and, most importantly, beyond it to locate new ways of imagining oneself and of remaking one's surroundings. Choreography, as I use it in the context of this ethnography, shows how young Black women

read their location in social contexts with consequences that may lead to shifts in those spaces, themselves, and the processes through which they are seen and assessed.

I apply choreography to the theoretical project of Black feminism that is interested in dislocating Black women's "entrenched fixity" (P. Collins 1998, 4) at the bottom of social hierarchies throughout historical changes in economic and political processes at the local and global level. Tropes of Black girls' marginalization, isolation, victimization, and absence are so pervasive that they conceal Black girls' centrality in the social spaces they inhabit as well as how girls nurture connections, relationships, and community in these spaces. These creative and strategic efforts are missed when we look through the lens of binaries that reinforce individual attainment over relationships and community.²⁸ Paying attention to shapeshifting and choreography thus forces theorizing to move "away from analyses of injustice that re-isolate the dispossessed" (McKittrick 2011, 958).²⁹

Janice, her sister, and her cousins—and Janice's fellow residents of Fresh Start—represent a generation of young Black women who are the granddaughters of women who came to northern cities like Detroit in search of more flexibility in and ownership over their lives. The economic, social, and familial disappointments this generation of late Great Migration women encountered in northern cities was largely due to racism and gender and class biases that confined them in positions scarcely better than those they had abandoned in the South. Members of Janice's generation, however, read disappointment and thwarted plans differently than their mothers and grandmothers. The younger women read social inequities as they gain traction and demand legitimacy on Black women's bodies. They read the ways they are captured in the white and adult gaze and respond with their own self-possessed, and often politically informed, choreography. Thus, choreography, like culture, is a process of meaning making. And like other cultural productions, choreography integrates practices of improvisation, borrowing, and sampling to disassemble and reconstruct current social realities.

Undoubtedly, the strategies young Black women employ to narrate themselves frequently do nothing more than strengthen the systems of containment in their lives. Nonetheless, if we learn to pay a different type of attention to the ways young Black women move through and write their own worlds, failures and unfortunate outcomes may still offer blueprints for mapping a different world. I take up Judith Halberstam's defi-

nition of failures as “the spaces in between the superhighway of capital” and take seriously the call for intellectuals to aspire to work “that revels in alternative ways of living and moving through the world that are not readily legible, known, visible and, thus, valued” (2012, 19). Black girls’ practices of reading, choreographing, and shapeshifting provide directions on these new roads. Ultimately, although young Black women are undoubtedly the focus of this book, *Shapeshifters* is concerned with locating the radical potential in all efforts—intentional, accidental, and otherwise—that move toward living outside of normatively scripted models of self-improvement and social mobility.

Observing Participant

I worked at GGC in all three service areas in the roles of volunteer dance teacher and program coordinator in the Community Outreach Program, director of both the Fresh Start Shelter and the Early Start Program, and as a worker under contract to implement the Move Experiment. In all of these roles I had direct and sustained contact with the shelter residents and girls in the other programs, and I interacted with direct service staff members as both co-worker and supervisor. As I moved up the agency ranks, I also developed complicated relationships with upper-level administrators and board members. In these relationships it was often made clear that my education, background, and ability to present myself in certain respectable ways was a form of cultural capital that could benefit the agency staff and clients. In my role as shelter director I had a unique view into the various ways cultural capital was performed and resisted at GGC. My physical presence as a relatively young Black woman collided with my role as program director and my position as a doctoral student to produce an identity within Fresh Start that in many instances served as the mutable screen on which ideas of race, class, and gender authenticity were projected. The ways in which the young women and the staff chose to interact with me were related to the roles I played and the wide-ranging situational contexts in which we found ourselves, but they were mostly about who others believed me to be despite these external considerations.

Although I am fully and inevitably present in this text, this ethnography is not about me. I am here throughout, though, as a reflection of the process of paying attention to what Soyini Madison calls the “being with in body-to-body presence with Others that makes the present realizably present” (2006, 323). My relationships with both the young women and

the staff were shaped through eight years of daily contact that often challenged the boundaries between the social and professional, intimate and public, work and home. I have watched shy fourteen-year-olds grow into self-possessed twenty-seven-year-old women and pregnant young women develop into mothers of beautiful thirteen-year-old sons and daughters. Several of the young women, like Janice and Sharita, whose stories will be traced throughout this book, were in my company for at least four hours a day, three or four times a week, for over eight years. We traveled together on week-long camping trips, choreographed dances and wrote poetry, protested and spoke out, and just hung out together: running errands, visiting relatives, shopping, attending outdoor festivals and slam poetry readings, and sitting in parks in the summer and coffee shops in the winter talking about the things that bring this ethnography to life—our families, ambitions, fears, desires, and images of ourselves in the world.

Currently we trade weekly texts and photos and find time once a month for catch-up phone calls that last two or three hours. “In order to collect ‘accurate data,’” Philippe Bourgois has written, “ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research; we become intimately involved with the people we study” (1996, 13). Madison uses Dwight Conquergood’s concept of “co-performative witnessing” to expand on the nature of the connections and commitments that emerge in the ethnographic process within methodologies typically captured under the term *participant observation*. Madison defines *co-performative witnessing* as “shared temporality, bodies on the line, soundscapes of power, dialogic interanimation, political action, and matters of the heart” (2007, 827). The point about political action is central here, as co-performative witnessing also requires us to do “what others do *with* them inside the politics of their locations, the economies of their desires and their constraints, and most importantly inside the materiality of their struggles and consequences” (ibid., 829). Both Bourgois’s and Madison’s articulations are helpful for explaining the intention with which I approached this project and continue to think about and enact the relationships that made this book possible.

Anthropologists’ claims to deep and enduring relationships with their interlocutors are both expected and easily dismissed as the disingenuous musings of self-congratulatory ethnographers. The fact that I developed close and complicated relationships with the girls whose stories I present in *Shapeshifters*, their families, and the Fresh Start shelter staff was not exceptional but required by the nature of the research and intensified by the fact of my employment with GGC. We shared time and

space and jointly constructed “soundscapes of power” that were animated by our hearts, with all their expansiveness and limitations. Though we may have struggled in the same temporal and geographic boundaries, the shape of our struggles and the consequences for the actions we took to move through them were not the same. The social spaces that we created together were rife with power differentials. There were many things I was not. I was not homeless, not a girl, not born and raised in Detroit, not an hourly staff member, and not a parent. There were other things that I was. I was a PhD student, a program director with the power to hire and fire, and a middle-class Black woman. The things that I was and was not, the labels that preceded me, and the ways in which these labels were attached to privilege mattered in every context for how I was both seen and able to see. It also mattered that I was often able to witness and write about struggles that did not necessarily affect me outside of my own political investments and commitments to these girls and women.

Through each stage of the process of producing *Shapeshifters* (entering the site, conducting fieldwork, writing, revising, writing and revising again, and reentering the site, and conducting more fieldwork), I was confronted with my own collusion with the structural, institutional, and ideological forces that constrain the possibilities for Black girls. I was also confronted with opportunities for taking productive actions as responses to these constraints. I write with as much love and honesty as my facility with language will allow about our individual and collective maneuverings through constraint and opportunity as they differently presented themselves to us—Black girls and a Black woman with the privilege of witnessing, living with, and renarrating their stories.

In my countless informal conversations with the Fresh Start residents, I have always been impressed with their candor and fearlessness in talking to me about issues that are not only revealing and sensitive but also often critical of the agency and me in my role as the shelter director. I was grateful for the opportunity, through the gift of these young women’s honesty and critical insight, to learn more about myself, especially my blindness to my own presumptions and biases. I undoubtedly used the myth of my exceptionalism to my advantage and, I hope, to the advantage of the young women in this ethnography and those like them who will be affected by their truths. Thus, it is important that I am transparent about my less academically motivated intentions in taking on the boundary-crossing roles that inflected many of the events in this book. The idea of being the director of a homeless shelter was appealing to me for several

reasons. Having been in graduate school for nearly four years and witnessing the passing of normative milestones such as the birth of babies, job promotions, and marriages in the lives of my nonacademic peers, I craved a concrete, discernible example of forward movement in my life. The position of shelter director was a way for me to project a shift in my life that I believed would be read as an appropriate adult achievement by my friends and family.

While I was working in the outreach program, more graduate students than I could count from the social science, education, and social work programs at the University of Michigan received clearances to conduct research at GGC. Young researchers with notepad and pen in hand would sit at the back of the room during our workshops or call young women into small rooms for interviews. I believe the majority of the scholarship was well-intentioned and intended to raise important questions. Yet I always wondered while running a workshop or participating in a meeting how different the agency looked from the perspective of the back of the room and distanced from the very real stakes that held all of us so tightly in their grasp.

From all I heard and saw about Fresh Start during my first year at GGC, the shelter was at the vital heart of the agency's tensions and was a microcosm for many of the challenges that confronted Detroit. The prospect of directing the shelter was immediately terrifying to me: it was clearly a difficult job that had substantial consequences for the young woman who depended on the shelter's institutional support and care. Directing the shelter was also immediately appealing: it was an embedded position from which I would be unable to deny the invisible tensions that made the shelter more than just a site housing interesting interlocutors. In this role, I believed, it would be impossible to write about Black girls without also including the imprint adult professional caregivers provide in simultaneously constructing and resisting the practices of exclusion that constrict Black girls' access to resources and opportunities that enable them to live self-directed lives. I suspected that acting as the shelter director would produce a more complicated narrative than one that centers on a faceless neoliberal institution that either subjugated Black girls or romanticized their resiliency. I also believed that working as an employee of the agency would reveal the multiple perspectives and competing interests that frustrate young Black women's attempts to transition out of homelessness and define success for them.

I was never surprised, but often disappointed, by just how much I was a product of the very norms I set out to disrupt through my research. On my first day as a volunteer I told the residents that I was an anthropologist. My description of my research at that time included references to the lifeworlds of Black girls and processes of identity formation. The three residents who came to my first class laughed in response. The one who appeared to be the oldest said: “You can write what you want, but don’t get it twisted. You are Black just like us. We are going to want you to do more than write while you’re here.”

I am not suggesting that this young woman sanctioned my appointment as a program coordinator and then shelter director. I do know, however, that the residents and the resident advisors did not consider me a typical researcher, making comments about how I would have to “help out” and “wouldn’t be allowed to just sit there and take notes,” and I was more than receptive to this reading of my positionality. With my own complicated relationship to the various ways capital was inscribed in and through my body, I imagined Fresh Start as a space where the narration of Black girlhood would require cross-cutting orientations to “help out.” We were all in this beautiful mess together. And only together could we craft models for different, more life-honoring ways of living.

Chapter Descriptions

The first chapter in this book tells the stories of three generations of women in the Brown family. It begins with Janice’s grandmother, Bessie, who came to Detroit from Alabama in the mid-1960s as part of the late Great Migration, and also includes Janice’s mother and aunts. The story of the Brown family charts a map of Detroit and tells a narrative of Detroit history from the perspective of low-income Black women who came to the city as processes of deindustrialization began to leave a visible mark on the lives of Black Detroiters. Bessie and her daughters had to earn their livelihood through backbreaking work in the low-paying service sector and care industries. I use the experiences of Janice and her sister and cousins, who are the third generation of Brown women in Detroit, to reconsider a politics of care as defined by Black girls. *Shapeshifters* is about Black girls, but Black girls do not fall from the sky or mysteriously emerge from state institutions. Their stories matter but do not exist in a vacuum. Janice and her cousins theorize their lives in relationship to

the life stories of the adults to which they have been exposed, the experiences of their family members, histories that have been passed down to or hidden from them, and their own understanding of these intersecting trajectories.

In chapter 2, I introduce the period in the shelter known as the shelter renovations or takeover when Camille, a former automotive industry executive, became the interim executive director of GGC. The renovations, makeovers, and improvements that Camille and the GGC board mandated for the shelter encompassed more than the physical structure of the building and, in fact, were primarily concerned with remaking the shelter residents through a specific focus on the discursive and embodied practices that construct the idea of successful Black girlhood. Chapter 2 addresses protest as it relates to the class politics, read through culture, that undermine Fresh Start's mission of "empowered positive choices" often repeated by the shelter staff.

Chapter 3 opens with the retelling of the story of a week-long camping trip and visit to a dude ranch in Ohio. It then moves to an analysis of the narrative—part urban myth and part oral history—surrounding a protest staged by the shelter residents and staff in the early days of Fresh Start's opening. These events and, most importantly, the ways they are retold and performed illustrate how Black girls respond to the ways they are misread by creatively narrating themselves and locating spaces of play in and through protest.

Chapter 4 focuses on how sexuality and gender organize the lives of young Black women by investigating the way ideas regarding normative and deviant sexuality as well as appropriate and dysfunctional gendered expressions circulated in the Fresh Start shelter. I introduce this chapter with the spoken word performance of a shelter resident named LaTonya whose words, and the intention behind them, force us to acknowledge the implications of perceptions of young Black women's sexuality as read through class. This chapter also tells Dominique's story. Dominique is an out lesbian who identified herself alternately as a "thug" and "mack" in the shelter and proceeded to charm the residents and shelter staff members with her compelling bravado. Through the accounts of those whom Dominique calls the "wannabes" (the other young women in the shelter who start dressing and comporting themselves in imitation of Dominique's machismo style), the staff members who are simultaneously repelled and seduced by Dominique's confident sexuality, and Dominique herself, we witness specific examples of how social benefits are offered to and sanc-

tions leveled against Black girls depending on their perceived sexual orientation, gendered performances, and assumed sexual practices.

The Move Experiment and the BlackLight project are the focus of chapter 5. The Move Experiment was a project in the shelter through which residents were hired, trained, and paid to develop and lead movement, self-care, and creative writing workshops for other GGC participants. This chapter shows how the young women hired as peer educators moved the work of the Move Experiment outside of the shelter by using performance as a form of community engagement and political commentary in the city. This chapter also takes up the connection between health and well-being, creative expression, and political engagement in communities. The young women in the Move Experiment demonstrate the limits of re-presenting the self through staged performance, while the young women in the BlackLight project establish self-knowledge and self-care as the starting point for broader transformative politics in the city of Detroit. Ultimately, the stories in this chapter provide real-life, practical examples of how performances of self in everyday life and in the formal performing arts are mutually definitive, embodied responses to the fundamental need to be seen and heard on one's own terms.