

Preface

Black youth are under siege in the United States, especially those living in and near poverty. When most people hear that my research focuses on the experiences of Black youth, they assume I am talking about boys and young men. The same people, regardless of their political affiliations, can rattle off the realms in which Black boys appear to be underperforming or failing to live up to the ideals of citizenship. These usually include references to police brutality and racial profiling, incarceration, the crisis in public education, absentee fathers, and, tangentially, sagging pants. Girls and young women,¹ if they are mentioned at all, are cited as either victims of the actions taken by Black men and boys or one of the primary reasons why Black men and boys have it so hard. Our failure to understand and, therefore, address the interlocking systems and entrenched policies that affect the entire diverse community of Black people in the United States has disastrous life-or-death consequences for the community's most vulnerable members: children and adolescents. Research in the social sciences on Black men and boys, media attention, and even the initiatives taken by our president have provided the general public with at least a language to talk about young Black men. Black girls, however, remain illegible. Don't get me wrong. I don't confuse visibility or sound-bite language with social value or even protection. But being held in a discursive frame, however misinformed, minimally establishes a place from which histories can be revised and stories told from the perspective

of those whose lives are actually on the line. Being talked about at least means that you have a chance to speak back.

Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship is an attempt to find a way into the lives of contemporary young Black women in the United States, a language to talk about the factors that circumscribe their realities. This book is based on eight years of engagement with young women in Detroit, most of whom were residents of the Fresh Start Homeless Shelter (a pseudonym) for young women. Although the narratives here are embedded in the particular place of Detroit and the particular time period of 2000 to 2008, the themes that emerge and the events that resonate travel beyond spatial and temporal boundaries. *Shapeshifters* is an ethnography; it is not a chronological historical account of Black girlhood or a study of the impact of all the socioeconomic elements that affect contemporary young Black women. Ethnography's thick description allows Black girls to address the fullness of their lives, not just those aspects that could be defined as putting them at some ill-defined risk or as responsible for preventing their success.² Black girls, like all of us, create beautiful and fulfilling lifeworlds that are far more than reactions to the challenges they face. Yet *Shapeshifters* is set in a homeless shelter in arguably one of the most beleaguered U.S. cities. When I chose Fresh Start as a site, my aim was to understand how individuals positioned on the losing end of power differentials rooted in age, gender, sexual identity, social status, access to financial capital, city of residence, and race experience confront social citizenship in the United States. What I found was that the Black girls at Fresh Start shift the terms through which they are categorized as worthy or unworthy or as acceptable or disrespectable citizens through their own definitions of family, care, love, success, and labor, which reflect a belief that the ability to experience a creatively self-determined life is a basic human right—an entitlement.

The young women and I use *entitlement* here and throughout the book intentionally. *Entitlement* typically connotes greed and undeserved favor when used in conversations that mention Black or poor members of society. This is especially true when talking about low-income young Black women. We need only to refer to the Reagan-era discourse that continues to unjustly haunt welfare recipients who happen to be young, female, and Black. Entitlement as theorized by Janice—the central figure in this ethnography—and the other young Black women in this book, however, is an empowered statement that disputes the idea that only certain people

are worthy of the rights of citizenship and the ability to direct the course of their lives.

This book covers a lot of thematic ground but is by no means all-inclusive. I organized the chapters based on the events that the young women at Fresh Start identified as most salient to their experience and most in need of further discussion. These are how Black girls theorize the struggles experienced by their mothers and other older women in their families; the problem of low-wage work; their bodies as the primary sites through which they experience social degradation, but also where they enact potentially socially transformative responses; the limited social scripts they are allowed to live within and speak from; the fluidity of love, sexual identity, and family as critical to how they establish networks of care; and the importance of performance and creativity to health and well-being.

Along with others who write about and work in organizations dedicated to supporting young Black women, I am stunned by the void in information and research on Black girls.³ *Shapeshifters* adds to the small body of literature on Black girls that we do have while suggesting possible road maps for future research. The central theme of each chapter could warrant an entire book-length response or some concerted effort at further investigation. The experiences of the young women in this book beg qualitative and quantitative researchers, policy makers, educators, elected officials, creative artists, and Black girls themselves to latch onto even a single thread in these stories that they may pull out and weave into inquiries that afford Black girls the full rights, freedoms, and protections of citizenship.