3 | Narratives of Protest and Play

Unlikely Cowgirls

Bessie's back porch was not an ideal place to have a conversation. The door out of the kitchen was constantly being flung open, barely missing people on the porch before it banged against the porch wall and rebounded closed. The younger grandchildren were almost always underfoot or spilling out onto the driveway, where they tossed dusty pebbles and ran from each other, screaming in mock terror. Nonetheless, this is where we often migrated to talk, especially when the story was long and required multiple tellers. Since there was no phone at the Browns', I would stop by in the mornings to remind them of a workshop happening at Give Girls a Chance (GGC) later that day or of an appointment that was scheduled for the end of the week, and I often ended up there for hours longer than I had anticipated. Janice, Crystal, and Tina were the only three of the eight Brown sisters and cousins staying at their grandmother's house on this particular day. Tina's little twin boys, nearly two years old, punctuated our conversation with excited squeals as they slapped the hard wood of the porch floor with their hands and played peekaboo between our legs that were dangling over the steps.

Janice was always outspoken, but Crystal and Tina were typically more reserved. It took nearly a year before they warmed up

to me and freely initiated conversations. At first, Crystal only spoke to me when she was mad or wanted me to do something for her, and Tina hardly ever spoke to anybody, keeping her eyes on the ground whenever she did. But now—six years, two babies, and countless experiences later—hours passed without a single pause in the conversation. It seems that in addition to music, neighborhood gossip, and the latest family drama, the Browns' favorite topic of conversation was GGC "back in the day." *Back in the day* refers to, as Janice puts it, the times before I "got moved up," meaning the time before I became the Fresh Start program director and was no longer categorized, in the Browns' minds, as part of the staff.

On this day, the "back in the day" story was the infamous week-long camping excursion that the Browns, ten other young women, and I embarked on in a small rural town eighty miles outside of Cincinnati, Ohio. Six days, thirteen preteen and teenage girls who had never slept outdoors, two chaperones unskilled in outdoor adventures, and a rural community that had only a vague understanding of what Detroit was like, made for many compelling stories. Over the years, the stories were passed down to the younger generation of Brown cousins and sisters who were not old enough at the time to go on the trip, as well as to newer GGC program participants who were told the stories as part of their informal peer orientation to the outreach program. At the time of the trip, the Browns made up the younger group of girls in the program. Tina and Crystal had just turned thirteen and Janice was fourteen, while the other young women were juniors and seniors in high school.

There was some debate among the after-school program staff about whether or not to take the Browns on the trip because of their age and the fact that they were, for the most part, considered behavioral problems. Although the outreach program serves girls and young women considered to be "high risk," the Browns fit that definition in ways that made some of the outreach staff uncomfortable. Unlike the older girls who had been associated with the agency since they were young girls in the Early Start Program, the Browns seemed rootless and unpredictable. When I first started working as an outreach coordinator, it was made very clear to me that the Browns were not thought of by the other coordinators and the program director as typical GGC girls and possibly signified a crisis in the already high-risk population and the family structure of the surrounding community. I was told on more than one occasion that the Browns were not what people were "used to." At the same time, however, the Browns started to symbolize a challenge to the outreach staff, a kind

of testing of our integrity and dedication. Unlike many of the longer-term participants in the Community Outreach Program, whose employed parents picked them up from program activities, knew the names of all the outreach staff, and demonstrated concerns when workshops conflicted with the completion of homework assignments, the Browns appeared to have no such adult interventions.

The program driver whose job it was to pick up and drop off program participants for workshops and other agency events continually bypassed their home the first couple of weeks they were added to his route because he refused to believe that the building at the address was not condemned. Saran wrap hanging from deteriorating window frames and a front porch that looked like a human booby trap made the outreach staff believe that there must have been, or soon would be, as one of them said to me, "some type of outside, city, legal type of intervention to prevent occupancy in such a dangerous location." When the Browns acted up by cussing out the driver, stealing something from the office, getting into fights with each other during workshops, or threatening other girls, there seemed to be no checks and balances between the agency and the home. There was no home phone, and no one felt comfortable trying to reach the girls' mothers, Gwen and JoJo, at their jobs. Notes sent home were like releasing scraps of paper in a high wind; they probably landed nowhere of any consequence. The Browns showed each of the outreach staff their own weaknesses and revealed the heart of our collective hypocrisy. Here were, in front of our faces in almost textbook-like clarity, the very girls described in the GGC mission statement.[1] Yet we needed them to make the journey to self-improvement and personal transformation that we hoped for them less encumbered, less difficult to travel.

The Browns called the week-long trip the "Black camping trip" because, from their perspective, Black people do not hike, sleep in tents, go canoeing, or do any of the things that could fit in the categories of outdoor activities or adventures. Thus, it made sense to them that the Outdoor Adventure Team was the brainchild of Pam, the Community Outreach Program director, who felt—like many youth workers in the inner city before and since then—that one way to expand the leadership potential and skill development of urban youth is to provide them with challenges outside of the familiar environment of the city.[2]

"You know I wasn't even trying to go on no camping trip. Please. Like I'mma be in the tent with some bugs and stuff like that. I looked at them like, you musta lost your mind, but then when I found out that Pam

wasn't coming and Aimee and Nikki was going I was like, bet I'mma be there." Crystal was talking to her cousin, Tina, who had joined us on the porch after calling down to us from the second-floor window above. Apparently, she had been trying to take a nap but had given up.

"Damn, y'all. I heard this story before. How many times you gonna tell the same damn story?" Tina rubbed her eyes, pulled up her pajama bottoms, and sat down next to me on the porch.

Crystal continued, undeterred. "Well, like I said. You remember, Janice, right? Like I was like, okay, we should go cause Nikki is cool and—I'mma be honest—we knew that you would be trying to make us do some ol' crazy, active mountain man-type stuff, but we knew it wouldn't be too crazy cause you still Black."

It broke Pam's heart not to able to participate in the trip, but the date conflicted with her honeymoon. She was anxious because four of the thirteen girls attending were from the Brown family, and Nikki, another program coordinator in the Community Outreach Program, and I (with zero camping experience between the two of us) would be the adults in charge. I liked Nikki, enjoyed her company, and was looking forward to sharing responsibilities with an adult who as a peer and—I assumed—less experienced than me in this particular arena, would not be overly critical about the outcome. However, I suspected not having a more experienced person along would mean more work for me in terms of making sure that the trip focused on the goals of skill acquisition and team building that were supposed to be of primary importance. My first clue that this might be more of a challenging proposition than I had anticipated occurred during a shopping trip with Nikki to purchase supplies. She bought a small TV and air mattress for her tent, thus reinforcing the girls' view that "camping is not a Black thing."

Since I was responsible for planning the details of the trip, I chose a campsite in Ohio that was just a little over an hour's drive from my parents' home in Cincinnati. I thought the proximity to the familiar would somehow make this venture less daunting. We left on a Sunday morning and returned the following Saturday afternoon. Six days is a long time to fill with active, adventure-type activities for thirteen girls who are suspicious of camping in the first place. The crammed agenda I eventually came up with included a canoeing trip, kayaking, low and high ropes courses, horseback riding, and an obstacle course on the campgrounds. We arrived in two fifteen-passenger vans, one driven by Nikki with all of the girls and the other driven by me and filled with all of our bags and equipment.

"'Member how scared we was, Tina, when we stopped for gas at that one station and everybody was lookin' at us like we was straight crazy? I was like, okay is it gonna straight up be some KKK type stuff going on here?" Crystal stood up as she imitated how the gas station owner and the other customers had stared at them when they walked into the convenience store. "I mean, I am like y'all have got to have seen Blacks before. I know you have TV at home. I know you get BET. So we started messing with them and like turning the tables on them, and then we felt less scared . . . for a minute."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"We just was fucking with them, so like when they asked, 'Where y'all from?,' we was like, 'Detroit, Compton, Watts, the Bronx, Harlem.' Like, it was so funny. Each one of us said something different and like really hardcore. And then Monica—y'all remember Monica? She was like talking to these dudes who came up to the van when Nikki was pumping gas, and she was like talking out the window like. 'Please step away from the van' in this real serious voice. And they was asking Nikki if we were from a girls' home, and they was like asking what we did and saying like, 'Y'all some bad girls, right?' And I could tell Nikki was getting pissed and she was trying to hurry up and pump the gas. I don't think she wanted to go off on them out in front of us. But Monica was so funny—she was like, 'Yes, you are right. These are very, very bad girls who have done things I can't even speak about. So, sirs, please step away from the van and please do not talk to my girls. They can't talk to people from the outside.[3] We can't be held responsible for what they might do.'"

"What happened then?" I had heard the story before but still wanted Crystal to continue.

"Well, they started backing up, like actually walking backwards like they was scared. And then one of 'em tripped over a pop can and fell. That shit was so dope. Funny, man. Just straight up funny."

This chapter considers how young Black women construct and use narrative and the performance of memory through storytelling to talk about themselves for and to one another. In the story of their experience at a dude ranch during a camping trip in Ohio and the contradictory narrative of a protest in the Fresh Start shelter that some question even actually happened, Black girls enact oral history as a reflection of what I call Black girl genealogies. These stories reflect and protest young Black women's placement at the nexus of various points of social erasure and degradation, but by no means are they solely concerned with forms of resistance

that generally, in literature and practice concerned with the expressions of the dispossessed, have been cast as speaking back or giving voice. Storytelling, recalling, and renarrating involve, at their core, creative play, artistry, performative skill, trickery, and wit. The nature of young women's storytelling in this chapter suggests the concept of storying that Kevin Young uses to ground his exploration of Black cultural practices and productions. Young writes that he is "interested in the ways in which black folks use fiction in its various forms to free themselves from the bounds of fact" (2012, 19). The storying tradition that Young explores across Black life is one of "counterfeit and fiction," and one that he brilliantly demonstrates "has just as much place in African-American letters as our rituals of church or prayer or music" (ibid., 25). The stories that the Browns and the other young women in this chapter tell, remember, misremember, and perform allow them to learn from history as they retell and shapeshift it, to simultaneously critique and reimagine the present, and to propose the possibilities for protest and play in the future.

Horseplay

The dude ranch brochure listed scenic horseback riding, an authentic cowboy-style lunch, a tour of the ranch facilities, storytelling time, three-legged horse races, and team building exercises as options that could be combined to make "the perfect day at the ranch for the experienced or novice cowboy or cowgirl." Some of the activities sounded a bit hokey and not really age appropriate for young women in high school, but the prices were cheap and the girls who helped plan the trip were adamant about including horseback riding. The dude ranch had the most stringent rules of the local recreational facilities for groups. When we arrived, we were told that even though I had selected only horseback riding, the tour, and lunch as our activities for the day, we would have to participate in the full range of options because "they created the full ranch experience and could not be separated." Randy, the director of the ranch and our tour guide for the day, also informed us that he had assigned all the ranch staff to take care of our large group, so we should take advantage of the resources made available to us. Since we had decided to spend most of the day at the ranch anyway, Nikki and I agreed to go ahead with the suggested "full cowgirl treatment."

Randy and his staff met our van after we pulled up on the gravel road at the side of the ranch. Every time I think about our first appearance

and what we looked like to Randy and his staff, I picture the gravel dust our wheels kicked up when we parked first swirling around and obscuring us and then dramatically fading to reveal unlikely cowgirls. Randy was overly friendly when he walked over to welcome us, and he shook each of our hands so furiously that he had to grab his cowboy hat in his other hand to keep it from falling to the ground. The rest of his staff stood back, looking as if they were stifling laughter. I couldn't tell if Randy was usually this enthusiastic or if he was trying to make up for his reserved staff. The bemused looks continued as we made our way through the tour of the ranch and eventually to the stables, where we were to be assisted in mounting our horses.

Through all of this, the girls were talking excitedly and making jokes, and it was difficult for me to tell at the time if they felt the tension that Nikki and I did. By the time we were on the trail, I heard some of the girls talking to the staff cowboy helpers, who rode back and forth to make sure that no one got lost or injured. Crystal recalled:

> Them dudes was pretty cool. We just thought that they was like the quiet type, like real cowboys, like all silent and proud and manly—you know. So we started messing with them to get them to talk and making them laugh, like asking questions like and just making it seem like we was scared like, "How many people have died on this trail?" And then Janice was like, "Have you ever had a horse burger?" and trippin' like she thought they were going to try to feed us horse burgers. But they was cool, to me. They was like laughing with us and making jokes, too. They said we was like the most fun group that came there so far that summer.

"They just said that because you was acting hella foolish," Janice laughed. "That dude who was up front riding with us was like not even trying to hear it. He was acting like, 'if I don't look at them or talk to them maybe they'll go away.'"

I asked Janice what she thought that was about. She said: "You know . . . just not used to Black people. Just scared of something different. They live in the country and don't see much. But it was like, okay, we don't sit up every day surrounded by people wearing cowboy boots and what not. I mean like what I am feeling is like, this ain't old hat to us. Like, okay, when have we ever seen a horse, let alone [been] ridin' on one? But we still open to it and like ready to be open to them . . ."

"Whatever," Tina had been pretty much silent up to this point, but now she cut Janice off. "Janice, you always trying to say some shit is racist. I had fun. It was cool to me until they made us make that damn horse. That's when I thought you know the only person not cool up in here is Randy. I mean, he really pissed me off with that mess." Everybody on the porch laughed at this, because the making of the horse was the highpoint of the story.

At the ranch the rule was that every group's day of activities culminated with the making of the horse under the tent canopy at the back of the main ranch house, where Randy lived with his family. There, under the canopy, we found a picnic table and all the tools we supposedly needed to make our horse replica: four two-by-fours, a manual saw, a hammer, nails, crazy glue, yarn, glitter, and two plastic eyeballs. Randy told us that we had an hour to make the horse and come up with a story about it. Every girl had to participate in creating the horse and making up the story, no adult help was allowed, no materials other than the ones provided could be used, and all the materials had to be used in some way. He was leaving us, he said, to check on his wife who was preparing dinner in the main house. By this time, it was after 6:00 PM and painfully apparent that everyone was tired, had had enough of each other and the entire experience, and more than ready to go home—even though home for us meant damp tents on rough ground.

Randy wasn't smiling anymore, and there were no more ironic jokes being made by the older girls. Nikki and I were just as uninterested as the girls in the oddly age inappropriate craft project,[4] but we tried to raise their spirits and offer some encouraging words. Slowly and deliberately, the girls started working on the horse. Because they were tired and annoyed by what they believed to be the pointlessness of the assignment, arguments began to break out. It didn't help matters that their raised voices caused Randy and his wife to stand in the doorway of the main house, observing us with their two children. The girl, who looked to be about seven years old, was pointing and laughing at Crystal who was chasing one of the other girls around the picnic table in semi-mock menace with the saw. By now, over an hour had passed, and the horse was no closer to materializing out of the wood, glue, and nails than before Randy left us. I could hear the girls mumbling "damn" under their breath and sucking their teeth as Randy approached the canopy. I think Janice tells this part of the story best:

> We looked up like, damn, okay, so here he come again. And by now we like just more than a little tired of Randy. And this time, he came wit' his kids. And they was trip too—that little boy with his big hat and the girl was like missing her front teeth. But I like wanted to think they were cute and like couldn't even go there because Randy just brought them out to be like, "Look, kids . . . look at the Negroes. They are a new species you have not seen before." And like we was already frustrated and ready to go home and trying to not disrespect, but that was taking me to the edge—I mean, the fact that they was looking at us like entertainment or some shit.

Nikki and I felt the girls' frustration and were fed up with the fascination with our group that seemed to come to a head in this last assignment. Before Randy returned, we asked the girls if they wanted to leave and told them that they didn't have to finish the project. It had been a long day, and we still had to repitch our tents and make our dinner and complete other campsite chores before it got too dark.

At that point, Janice remembers, "there was no way in holy hell we were going to give up. It was like, 'Oh, hell naw. We 'bout to make a damn horse. Just because you think we can't.'"

Although "adult chaperones" were not supposed to participate or help in any way during this final assignment, Nikki and I took turns trying to help cut the two-by-fours with the dull saw and offered suggestions on how to manipulate the yarn to make the mane. Fed up, Monica grabbed a two-by-four and laid it on the picnic table bench so that half of it was on the seat and half hung over the edge. She asked Tina to stand on the half on the bench and then stomped on the other half until it broke off.

"I ain't know what she was about to do, but it worked and that stuff was mad funny and a good idea," Tina recalled. She chuckled as she reenacted Monica jumping down on the piece of wood with a grimace on her face. "Moni was like, unga bunga and making monkey sounds . . . she had us rolling. She was like, 'Yeah, okay, we're monkeys in the zoo, you can see monkeys in the zoo. Here we are.'" I asked Tina to clarify if this was before or after Randy came out with the kids.

"After," she said. "You don't remember? They came out the first time when they busted you helping us cut the wood and you was like, 'Whatever, Randy, these girls need to finish up so we can eat.'" Crystal and Janice cracked up at the way Tina made fun of the way I talked and nodded to show that they remembered this part of the story as well.

I do remember what happened next, however. Energized by Monica's innovative solution to our material challenges, the rest of the girls started going to work hammering and gluing on plastic eyes. It was getting darker, more difficult to see, and harder to work through the hunger and exhaustion. I started cleaning up the scraps around the canopy and encouraged the girls to start thinking about their story so that they would be ready when Randy returned and we could get back on the road to camp. I tried not to notice that the horse had only three legs and generally looked a mess. When Randy returned, he brought his entire clan with him: his wife, two children, an older brother, and his father. They had already eaten dinner and seemed ready for a show as they stood back and watched the girls put the finishing touches on the horse. By now it was nearly 8:30, and the lights had come on around the backyard area where we were gathered. Randy's wife and children looked wide-eyed and were pretty much speechless, aside from the whispered remarks they made to each other behind their hands. The children did a lot of pointing and giggling, even though they were much closer to us than is usually considered pointing distance. The grandfather kept clearing his throat, making us all look over to see if he was about to say something or if he wanted to get our attention. When I looked over, he was exchanging curious looks with Randy.

After fifteen or so minutes of this awkward watchfulness, Randy asked the girls to present their horse and tell its story. I think I heard a gasp when Janice stepped forward to place the wobbly horse on the table and it promptly fell on its side. The ends of the horse's three legs were rough and splintery where they had been broken off instead of sawed. Each leg was a different length. The brown yarn that was meant to be a mane was not securely glued on and hung down over what, based on proximity, would have been the horse's face. One eye swung precariously off the side of the face, and the other was unfortunately stuck to the bottom of one of the splintery legs. The poor horse was almost too sad to be hilarious—but not quite. Nikki's eyes were watering as she tried to hold back tears. I could only briefly glance at the girls because the looks on their faces threatened to send me over the edge. Only silence came from Randy's group. There was no more throat clearing or giggling.

"I know they thought we was like some slow kids or like mentally retarded when they saw that horse." Janice moved to the other side of the porch to swat at a fly that had landed near one of the twins. Tina, Crystal, and I were doubled over in laughter, picturing the wooden horse in our minds and redescribing the worst parts.

Randy took off his hat, which was the first time I had seen him without it, and placed it on the table next to the fallen horse. He took the horse in his hands with an odd gentleness that made it seem as if he was preparing to perform some type of healing surgical procedure. He looked the horse over, turning it upside down, and then tried to place it back on the table. But a piece of gluey yarn stuck to his hand, and in the process of trying to free himself he took off what was left of the pitiful mane, except for a small scrap of yarn that clung to the horse's forehead. I wanted to laugh so badly that I felt my head might explode, and Nikki reached over to squeeze my hand. Randy blushed with what seemed to be a combination of amusement and embarrassment and cleared his throat like his father. "Well, ladies," he said. "Why don't you tell us what you have done here. I mean, tell us this horse's story."

Since this was Janice's favorite part of the story, we let her initiate the retelling. She said that they were all "just basically beyond pissed at this point" and felt humiliated by Randy and his family: "We wasn't mad 'bout the way the horse looked 'cause that was like the funniest part, so we wasn't mad that everybody was trying not to laugh 'cause we were laughing ourselves. But we didn't appreciate being looked at like we were in a zoo or like—you know, the way they played us, it was like they thought we were crazy or stupid. That is the part that made me really angry. So we just made up a story on the spot like, 'Okay . . . this is probably what you want to hear.'"

The girls did not have time to come up with a story together beforehand, so they improvised a story with each girl adding to the mythical life of the horse before turning the narrative over to the next girl. They were standing in a straight line that was perpendicular to the edge of the picnic table, which made them look like soldiers standing at attention.

The story started with Monica. "This is our horse, Swoop," she said. "We call her Swoop because as you can see her bangs are swooped to one side, a popular hairstyle where I come from." The one thin piece of yarn meant to be the horse's mane actually did look like the swoop bangs that were common among teenage girls in Detroit that year.[5] Monica's name for the horse sent chuckles down the line of girls.

Janice, next in line, grabbed Swoop from Monica's hands and continued the story in the same matter-of-fact, academic tone that Monica had used. "Well, as you can see, Swoop's hair is very important to her. Like most horses that grow up in the city, she puts a lot of time and effort into her hair and spends her hard-earned money working late nights at the Chicken Shack on her hair."

Nikki closed her eyes and shook her head back and forth, and then hit me on the hand. "Can you believe them? They are *really* trippin'. Umm, those girls." Her tone was that of a mother talking to another parent about her mischievous child, trying to appear stern and in control but secretly proud of her child's creativity and spunk.

Janice was prepared to go on, but Sharon took Swoop out of her hands and took over the story: "Yes, working late nights at the Chicken Shack is not always easy for Swoop. Sometimes she is tired and afraid to walk home on 6 Mile Road by herself. The Livernois bus doesn't run that late and she doesn't have a car, so she must gallop home through the dark streets alone."

On the porch at the Browns' house, I had already pulled out my tape recorder. This was at least the third time I had witnessed Janice telling the Swoop story, complete with each girl's addition to the plot, and I was determined to finally get it on tape. The Brown girls had become so accustomed to my tape recorder that they already set it up and tested the voice volume for me before I realized it. The recorder encouraged Janice's theatrics as she told the Swoop story in the voice and demeanor of each girl.

"Tina, you were next, right?" Janice got ready to offer her best impersonation of her cousin: "There is no rest for horses like Swoop growing up in the harsh ghetto. They try to escape the drugs, the crime, the risks of—."

Tina cut Janice off at this point. "I didn't say that. I said 'the at-risk, the high-risk, the drugs, the crime, [her voice got low and pseudo-emotional] the tragedy.'"

Janice continued: "Whatev. Then that one girl what was her name? Karen, or something like that—was like, 'As you may have noticed by now, Swoop only has three legs. I hate to say it but, yes, Swoop lost one of her legs in a tragic drive-by shooting. The police say they are still looking for the suspects but . . . we all know what that means.'"

Crystal, who had been leaning back against my legs from her seat on the step in front of mine sat up. "Okay. This was my part now. Okay. I was like, 'Yes. Let's take a moment to say a prayer for poor Swoop.'" Crystal deepened her voice to re-create the preacher-like cadence she had used during her performance at the ranch: "'My people. Bow your heads and raise your right hand above the head of this poor horse. Let this horse know that you are with her through her pain and want to see her raise up to a new life in the Lord. Can I get an Amen?' I remember everybody was like all serious and like amen, amen—now that was like the true funniness. And

then a couple of them other girls, the more quiet ones, was like laughing and trying to add something in. Like, what? What'd they say, Tina?"

Crystal seemed unsure of how the story finally ended, but she went on: "They was just like, 'Let's try to help poor Swoop get to the Derby so she can finally take home the trophy.[6] Help her get out of the ghetto.'"

By the time Swoop had been passed down through all of the girls' hands and placed back on the picnic table, she was completely bald and threatening to become two-legged. For some reason, I will always remember the end of the story being punctuated by the pop of Swoop's plastic eye as it landed on the floor after Monica flicked it off her shoulder.

"Do you remember what Randy and his family did after the story?" I asked the girls.

"They was just standing there looking straight crazy as far as I remember. They was like trying to be all nice but they was straight shook. You know, they ain't know what to say or do. But damn, it felt good like to be like, okay, this is what you think, this is what you asked for, this is like, what you really been thinking 'bout us since we got here." Janice moved over on the step so she could get closer to the tape recorder.

"Right," Tina jumped in:

> You know, it was like you want to stand around and point fingers like you ain't never seen nothing like us, and then you want to hear a nice—I mean, I'm sure they was expecting to hear a nice story like, "Okay. Our horse's name is Meadow, and she is a friendly horse that likes to eat hay, blah, blah, and whatnot whatever." But we was like all tired. I mean tired, like really tired. It ain't to me—I mean, to me it didn't matter at that point in time what ol' boy at the ranch or his jankety family thought. I was like, "Look, you think we stupid and the horse we made looks jacked up, so here is a jacked-up story to go along with it."

"But you can't even really trip on the dude ranch like that is the only place and time where you felt like that." Janice seemed to be thoughtfully considering what Tina had just said. She continued:

> "I mean, I been in the GGC van in Detroit before where peeps be like, "What'd y'all do? Y'all some bad girls, right?" But I don't understand that, like, why they just assume that we did something bad in order to end up in GGC. Because when I talk about I'm at GGC they're like, "Why, what'd you do? Why your momma put you in there?" I'm like, "Nothing,

why do you think that?" And it ain't just because people don't know what GGC is or associate it with a home, 'cause I'm sure don't nobody be asking those white girls from Girls, Inc.[7] if they did something bad cause they see Girls, Inc. as like a spin-off of the Girl Scouts and think them girls is like winning awards and badges and stuff and getting good grades. Like it is an honor to be in that program, and like even at GGC we might be doing some of the same stuff and, I mean, good stuff—but it is just like assumed that we are troubled.

"Right, but it was like the last straw at the ranch 'cause I felt that was supposed to be like a vacation." The exasperation was clear in Tina's voice. "It was like, 'Okay, show time' when that piece of crap horse came up and dude was like, you know, talking to us like we was ignorant: 'Tell us what your horse did.' Please. I'm thinking, 'My horse ain't do shit but sit up here and look crazier 'n hell, and if it did you really didn't care 'cause you really just trying to figure all us out.'"

"I don't know." Crystal added her commentary in what had gone from light-hearted reminiscing to an emotionally charged debate. "Like when you said we should just go"—Crystal was looking at me now and talking about my suggestion that we leave in lieu of completing the horse assignment—"I was like happy and agreeing at first 'cause it was like some ridiculous shit that was about to go down. I could feel it. But now I ain't mad we stayed 'cause I think we was able to show them that we got it. That we get what they think."

After Crystal's last comment, Tina turned off the tape recorder and went inside with a twin on each hip. She said she needed to check their diapers. Janice and Crystal decided they wanted to walk to the beauty supply store on Michigan Avenue and asked what time I would be back to pick them up for the dance workshop later that evening. They were getting on with their day and also signaling to me that they had had enough of the current conversation. Driving home, I thought about how the girls talked about the Swoop story in the van on the way home from the ranch, how they now assessed the time at the ranch, and why the story was so important to them that it was retold so often and in such great detail.

The younger Brown cousins were too young at the time to go with us on the trip, but they added their two cents to the story because they had heard it so many times. Sometimes I still get confused about which girls were actually on the trip because they all speak about that time in Ohio with so much clarity and emotion—especially the ones who weren't there. The incident

at the gas station before the girls reached the campsite foreshadowed what was to happen at the dude ranch while also encapsulating in the young men's taunting sarcasm and the young women's witty response the game of identity presentation that these young women play in less obvious ways in their daily encounters. As Janice points out toward the end of the story, these types of misreadings of who they are and of value judgments placed on their identity occur in their own communities in Detroit and are, thus, not a new negotiation specific to rural Ohio.

At the start of the forty-five-minute ride back to the campsite from the dude ranch, the van was vibrating with the girls' energy. There was a lot of repeated "Did you see their faces?" and "See what happens the next time they get a call from a group from the D. They'll be like, 'Oh, hell naw!' " The overall tone of the girls was one of victory and pride, and there was a distinct feeling that they had proved a point long in the making. But as I heard the Browns retell the story in the years since, I began to see another angle to the story and the significance it held as it was passed down and variously performed. The oral documentation of the event and the story's place in the historical record for the GGC participants was just as important as the actual Swoop event—perhaps even more so. The playfully subversive content at the heart of the story certainly mattered for how the Black girls at GGC understood the possibilities for shifting the shape of contexts as foreign as a dude ranch in Ohio. However, it also contributed to their expanding Black girl archive.

They were both constructing and referring to a road map, a set of choreographed steps used to upset the prevailing narratives of their lives. In the moment that the story was told, each girl took her turn to draw from and then add to the collective plot in a spontaneous revision and satire of the trope of Black girls from the Detroit ghetto. Over the years, Swoop's collaborative biography became a concrete example of the power of self-authored narratives as a key shapeshifting strategy. Swoop's story made transparent how the girls were read as out of place in real time at the dude ranch while tethered to other geographically and psychically plotted places, such as Detroit and Blackness, that were imagined through their bodies. They performed a version of fish-out-of-water comedy embedded with critical social commentary to both highlight and challenge this mapping of their bodies' space. In the Fresh Start shelter, the Swoop story, most often retold by Janice during her time as a resident, became part of a protest history that included a school walkout staged by Detroit students on the city streets in 1999 and the elusive shelter protest.

Schoolgirl Rapes

In November 1999, three hundred students from Denby High School staged a walkout. They left their classes and walked from their school on Kelly Avenue on the east side of Detroit to the school administration building. Since the start of the school year in early September, eight young women had been raped and another twenty young women had been victims of attempted abduction while trying to make their way to school. Frustrated by the underplaying of these sexual attacks in the media and the slow response of city administrators and law enforcement officials, the group of students, most of whom were Black girls, decided to march as a protest against their invisibility and their lack of protection. When I first heard about the schoolgirl rapes, as they were officially and sensationally called in televised and print news reports, it was at the height of student outrage. The media reports seemed to focus more on the brewing conflict between the students and the school administrators than on the disturbing reality of sexual violence that was making their everyday walk to school a matter of life and death for several hundred Black girls living in Detroit.

Eventually, Mayor Dennis Archer entered the conversation and tried to address the troubling situation by holding a series of town meetings to which parents, students, and concerned community members were invited. Disappointingly, however, the 300,000 flyers distributed to announce the meetings netted only fifty attendees. While the mayor worked to motivate the citizens of Detroit with statements like, "Now is the time for every Detroiter to do what he or she can do to make sure our streets are safer," the young women expressed their own feelings of abandonment and lack of adult accountability. One sixteen-year-old young woman told reporters, "I'm really, really mad about it." She wondered, "What is wrong with the parents? They're all out there blaming the mayor. What about everybody sitting at home right now?"[8] After several more months of attempted and successful assaults on young women, one man was finally apprehended, and the events swirling around the schoolgirl rapes started to slowly fade from public view and concern.

The Shelter Protest

While I was still employed as a program coordinator in the Community Outreach Program and trying to decide if I should accept the executive director's invitation to direct the shelter, I started to hear snatches

of stories and vague anecdotes about a protest staged by the residents of the Fresh Start shelter the year before I came to GGC. Curious about what had really happened, I asked longtime GGC staff members what they remembered about the protest. At first, their individual accounts were clear and coherent, but as time passed and I compared the stories to one another, the details became muddled and the storytellers were rarely able to defend their original narratives with any degree of confidence. Some of the staff members called the event the shelter strike, others termed it a boycott, and still others referred to a time when the shelter residents were "acting out" or "looking for attention." All of the responses, however, were similar in that the event was discussed a year later as an urban legend—a mythical story about the shelter that, once told as truth, had become a tale of what could have happened. The story I first heard was that on one hot summer day, fed up with what they believed to be the unfair and overly punitive shelter rules, the residents boycotted the shelter by staging a sit-in on the front lawn of the church where the shelter was then housed. Apparently, this boycott even included hand-crafted signs and marching in an orderly circle. I was told this story by Ms. Germaine, a Black woman in her late fifties who worked in the Early Start Program, when I started as a volunteer dance instructor at GGC. She talked to me a few months after the shelter strike as a way of warning me against working with the girls and staff in the shelter:

> Um, you can work over there if you want to, but note that those girls over there are a trip. It ain't like in Early Start. I mean, how you gonna protest your living environment when you live in a shelter? Come on, you are homeless! Those girls are rough, and they don't care about nothing having to do with common sense or order. I had to drive down Michigan Avenue myself that night to see it. Girl, they had signs and everything. Can you believe it? Striking and you don't even have a job? Folks trying to help your Black butt. What kind of nonsense is that? Nah, you better off here. That shelter is a trip.

By the time I started classes with the shelter residents, nearly fourteen months had passed since the so-called strike, and none of the current residents had been living in the shelter at the time of the protest, although they had all heard about it. The comments they made included:

> "Yeah, I heard that was crazy. I wish I had been there. Them girls must have been trippin'."

"I mean, there are rules that get on your nerves, but come on. I ain't a little kid. I have a job and trying to get my own apartment. I couldn't be risking getting thrown out like that."

"I think that is good what happened because it probably made things different. I think most of the rules that I see now make sense to me, but they wasn't—I mean, I don't think they was like this until recently."

When I pressed those newer residents[9] to think about what things about Fresh Start could have been so bad before, they all agreed that it probably had to do with the way the previous residents were talked to and treated by the resident advisors (RAs) and was less about the actual program guidelines and expectations. One resident said: "You can tell most of the staff is strugglin' with niceness. They first instinct is to talk to you like you stupid, and then they usually try to clean it up later when they think you are going to go above they heads and say something or go off real bad."

The idea of RAs "cleaning it up" is something that many of the residents mention as a way of explaining what they see as the direct service staff's compulsion to treat them with respect only when there is the threat of disciplinary action from a supervisor. This is just one of the many ways that the residents demonstrated their perception of the RAs as powerless within the organization. The contradictory statements the residents made regarding the RAs were emblematic of the complicated nature of their relationship, and the oral history tied to the shelter protest reflected these tensions. Out of the fifteen RAs who worked full- or part-time shifts in the shelter while I was the director, three were former residents of Fresh Start and five more had spent some time in other residential facilities while they transitioned out of homelessness or sought refuge from an abusive relationship.[10] The RAs provided the residents with a sense of how power dynamics worked for and against them at Fresh Start and in the world outside of the building.

In some accounts of the shelter protest, the residents were said to be protesting against being overly policed by the RAs. In other accounts, the residents and RAs were portrayed as protesting together in solidarity against the disrespect both groups received within GGC. The residents were frustrated with the task of constant self-improvement in an organizational structure where their older age and perceived lack of familial connections automatically framed them as delinquent. The RAs were protesting their economic and social marginalization in GGC. The story of

the residents protesting against the organization and the RAs as the most punitive aspect of the organization and the story of the residents and RAs mobilizing together against their status never truly cohered in one narrative told by multiple people.

The two accounts did, however, make sense as parts of the same concern. If the RAs—half of them at any given time former shelter residents—were reflections of the residents' future selves, then was working for hourly wages in jobs that held little possibility for advancement or respect the future that the young women had to look forward to after obediently and conscientiously "working the program"? This not improbable outcome undoubtedly fed resentment between the residents (who recognized themselves in the RAs and resisted that future) and the RAs (who often wanted the residents to have more than they themselves did, in terms of economic capital and social status). Thus, the protest may have emerged from both the residents' and the RAs' refusal to believe the promise of social mobility offered through Fresh Start. More interesting than the question of the mythical or real nature of the shelter protest is the salience of the narrative at Fresh Start as a cautionary tale—meant not to warn potential shelter employees about the out-of-control nature of the residents, as Ms. Germaine intended, but as an indictment of another narrative: that of the traditional path to financial stability, occupational security, and respect for low-income Black girls and women.

In spite of the contradictory stories attached to the real or imaginary (as some staff members persistently claimed) shelter protest, one particular story resonated with me. Andrea had been an RA during the time of the alleged protest, although by the time of our conversation she had moved on to an administrative job with the city. She was eager to talk about what she called the "sit-in" and began, with intense animation, by offering details she recalled from the event:

> Well believe it or not, a few of them started making signs like "unfair treatment," "we are people too"—stuff like that. Girl, it was so funny to me. I mean, it was more like by the time we had got to that point, it was like we were really already over it. But it was like, okay, we went this far—why not go all the way? But I mean by that time we had all vented and were just taking it as a joke. We was playing by that point, but at the same time the reason behind it all was serious. I don't know if you know what I mean, but it was like they were like doin' it tongue in cheek. And to be honest, I didn't think it lasted more than a few hours. I called

> Christine to come down to the shelter because she was always on call, supposedly, and—well, maybe the other girl called her, but I know it wasn't because we couldn't handle the girls. We thought she should see what was going on. But, you know, by the time she came down the girls was mainly just chillin' on the front steps—just hanging out like any other summer night.

What interests me in Andrea's story more than the fact that her clear and specific details, earnest narration, and distance from the organization lent her memory credibility is the way she told the story. Her description of the play within the protest aligned with the events that occurred at the dude ranch, along with its endless retelling in the Brown family and throughout the organization. Both the shelter protest and the dude ranch stories acted as part of a larger narrative genealogy that provided the residents with performative, shapeshifting texts useful within and beyond institutions like Fresh Start. The schoolgirl rapes protest of 1999 was important as the example from recent historical memory that the young women could draw on as representative of courageous collective action publicly taken in defense of the brutal violation of Black girls' bodies. The student protest in response to the sexual assaults was a bold statement of the value of Black girls' lives within a social context where their right to reside in cities that afford them safety and protection is denied. Although the young women at the dude ranch and the residents sitting in on the front lawn of the church were not necessarily in imminent danger of the type of life-threatening brutality that spawned the 1999 protest, the telling of the Swoop story at the dude ranch and the shelter protest were responding to the same sentiment of unprotected and denigrated Black girlhood the schoolgirl rapes represented.

Protesting and playing are interconnected practices used by both the young women in the shelter and its staff members in very well planned and overt ways as well as in ways that appear unconscious and spontaneous. I use *play* in this context to refer to the joy in working collectively to confront the most subtle and difficult to define aspects of institutionalized injustice and everyday instances in which Black girls find themselves dismissed and/or violated. The indignity felt on an individual level becomes a source of power and a catalyst for inspiring feelings of freedom and control, when young Black women realize that they do not have to emotionally process their experiences alone. Andrea explains this feeling in her account of the shelter protest, which—from her perspective—was able to become a "tongue in cheek" reaction to perceived agency injustice

after the young women were able to verbalize their common frustration. The shelter became a tenable space from which the play in protest could be performed, once it was clear that the residents and the RAs were of like mind in addition to being of like background and recipients of like treatment. The play in the protest is a sense of temporary freedom from and control over structural constraints. Politically charged anger and resentment erupted in this communal home space of shared cultural and life experiences. Barbara Myerhoff describes these shifts from political to cultural protests as "subtle and gradual but distinct and frequent" (1971, 115). This is a useful way to capture the nature of the many overt and hidden acts of protest (by the staff and residents) in the agency in which politics and culture become mutually definitive.

In adult responses to the schoolgirl rape protest, the focus was mostly on the boldness demonstrated by the girls in deciding to skip classes and confront school administrators. The incredulous tone of their reactions made the adults appear more aggrieved at the young women's act of speaking out against the violence enacted on them than at the idea that girls were being raped in broad daylight on their way to school. We see this same disdain in the staff members' commentaries on the shelter protest: all of the statements, except for Andrea's, seemed to be most concerned with the perceived audacity of the residents' believing that they had a right to complain about anything, given their circumstances as homeless young women with presumably no other support or options outside of GGC. The events (both those that were clear and known and those that were vague and hypothesized) that ignited the protests in both situations were lost in the overreaction to the fact that young women felt entitled to challenge institutional authority. I compare these two scenarios to get at how rights and protections are directly connected to the value placed on certain bodies (Crenshaw 1991). The abduction and rapes of the high-school students received the most sustained attention only after young Black women demonstrated their defiance by leaving the supposed safety of the school environment and marching in the very streets that threatened them.

It is through the daily acts of play and protest (not all of which are as remarkable as the shelter protest) that take place in the context of the agency that the contours of class- and race-based expectations and boundaries are alternately reinforced and threatened, and the instruments of power are revealed.[11] The conscious employment of these acts—along with their interpretations, correct or not—influences perceptions of what it means to be considered appropriate and acceptable, or out of control and ghetto.

This, in turn, shapes the basis for the tensions between residents, staff members, and board members related to attributions of cultural capital and personal worth invested in specific bodies. Through her creative and political work with Black girls and women, Ruth Nicole Brown has come to understand the seriousness with which Black girls approach play and with which we need to read their practices. In the creative ciphers and games played in Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths (SOLHOT), it is clear to all participants that what they were up to before, and what they "will return to after the game, is not play" (2009, 100). At the dude ranch and on the church lawn, the playfulness in the protests acknowledged the seriousness of what was at stake in the girls' lives before the break marked by each event and of what may or may not be changed by their play. Brown is also clear about what does not constitute play. She uses what occurs during the game called Little Sally Walker to articulate how the rules of play are collectively established and sometimes broken by a girl who substitutes discipline for play:

> But the real culprit of unraveling the cipher typically manifests in those overly disciplined bodies that don't have much play practice. Through the chanting, we can distinguish and facilitate the healing of a Black woman girl child whose youth was stolen. Little Sally Walker, after all, is ritual. However, what cannot be tolerated is someone whose disciplined indoctrination shows up when they become Sally and, for example, take "too long" to teach us a move, confirming that what they are about to dance is over-choreographed to the point of leaving no surprise. This translates as domination. Why, Black girl, can't you move the way you want to move on a whim? Why, Black girl, can you not think for a moment about yourself, what you want to say and how you want to say it? Why, Black girl, are you still seeking someone's permission and/or approval to dance? This is domination. The game is over. This is not playing. (2009, 101)

During what was alternately called Camille's reign or the shelter takeover, the matter of approving of Black girls' bodies and the ways in which their bodies occupied space critically influenced the perception of what was needed to renovate Fresh Start beyond changing the color of the walls or the fabric on the couches. Black girls' bodies were seen as sites to be reworked, and their biographies were also significant factors in determining the girls' ability to receive resources from the institution and be seen as primed for the various stages of transition through the shelter—from

initial intake as a worthy resident, through program milestones, to eventually moving out on their own. Thus, the ways in which the residents talked about their personal histories and the biographies that garnered salience in the agency were directly tied to the limited ways Black girls and women are able to gain legibility and validity as proper residents, workers, and citizens. Black girls and women at Fresh Start who appeared to be seeking permission from upper-level white administrators by working within standards of normative social acceptability—who managed their bodies and reframed their personal narratives—had lost the ability to play, even if they appeared to be mastering the game. Terri's comment to Sharita[12] at the end of the house meeting about the shelter renovations demonstrated that Terri suspected Sharita might be losing the game in her attempts to please everyone but herself. The two narratives that were the most common in the shelter were those of redemption and of exception.

Narratives of Redemption and Exception

Three months after I finished my fieldwork at Fresh Start, I pulled up at the McDonald's drive-through in midtown Detroit and found Sharita Daniels ready to take my money at the first window. Sharita had been a resident of Fresh Start for a little over a year, which was six months longer than the average woman's stay. After she discharged herself from the shelter,[13] Sharita continued to be a regular fixture at the agency, acting as a tour guide for donors on site visits, speaking to current residents in workshops, and generally being the face of Fresh Start until there were others who could fill her shoes.

I don't know which of us was more shocked to see the other. Sharita had endured many of my long lectures on the dangers of fast food, and the last few times I had heard from Sharita, she was on her way to Lansing to study at Michigan State University. I guess we both wondered what had happened since then. Sharita asked me if I was still at Fresh Start. I told her I was doing some research there and joined the residents on recreational outings from time to time.

"Well, be careful," she said. "I can't stand that place."

I didn't know what would be appropriate to say to her in the short time I had as one car in a long line of customers. I think I said "umm" and nodded my head to show I understood. "So, you still writing that book about Fresh Start?" Sharita asked. "Do you want to talk to me?" We exchanged phone numbers and made tentative plans to meet up later that week.

The McDonald's exchange was not the first time I heard Sharita criticize Fresh Start. She and I had spent a fair amount of time together, especially toward the end of her term when she was an official Fresh Start resident. Although I no longer worked at GGC and Sharita was no longer a resident at the time, we were both frequently called on to represent and speak on behalf of the shelter. For Sharita, this meant talking to board members, donors, and staff from other collaborating agencies about her life prior to Fresh Start and how the program was helping her achieve her goals. On one occasion, Sharita and I even traveled together to the state capital to testify to the state legislative committee on youth and families. Our goal was to convince these policy makers that programs in Detroit for high-risk and homeless teens were worth supporting; that they were making the types of differences in young people's lives that challenged negative views of poor, urban youth.

Sharita had shared an apartment with her mother, five-year-old twin brothers, and a twenty-two-year-old brother, but the building burned down. Sharita's mother and brothers moved in with an aunt of Sharita's and her two young daughters. When the overcrowded living situation became overwhelming for the combined families, her mother decided that Sharita would be the one to find a new place to stay. Even though she had a brother who was five years older, her family thought that Sharita would have better luck in the search for housing, since she was young, attractive, and female.

During the ninety-minute drive from Detroit to Lansing to testify to the legislature, Sharita talked a lot about her feelings about GGC. Her words flowed seamlessly as she discussed what she believed to be the dishonest and self-serving way she was "used as a poster child." She understood that what made her a Fresh Start success story were her articulateness, wit, fair skin, ultrafeminine appearance ("I definitely am a girly-girly," was one of her favorite ways to describe herself), and ability to say the types of things that older, conservative adults with money and self-defined altruistic leanings liked to hear. At the same time, Sharita's personal history, along with the circumstances that brought her to the shelter, were tragic enough to guarantee that she fit the mold of Fresh Start's target population.

Much of who Sharita was in these public and presentation settings, she said, was based on information she had gathered early on, as a girl in elementary and middle school.

"As long as you act nice and polite and can speak well, you have one up on everybody else. You get 'let in' in a way." Sharita said she felt good

about the positive attention she received in school at the time but now, looking back, it was clear that she could see how unfair this particular brand of attention was to those who were unable to perform appropriately. Sharita talked at length about the friends she had who she felt were smarter than she was or worked harder but were ignored because they didn't know how to "talk right" to the teachers or chose to hang out with "thugs" and "juvenile delinquents."

"You know whenever I am about to go to one of those board meetings or something like this with you, I always tell the girls that I am getting ready to do my whiteface routine?" I could feel Sharita's eyes on me as I drove. "What do you think about that? Are you in whiteface, too?" she asked.

Less than a month after this conversation, Sharita discharged herself from the shelter. It was the climax of her success story at Fresh Start. She had been accepted at Michigan State and was going off to begin her first semester as a college student. Or, at least, this is how it appeared at the time. However, the truth that I learned during an informal interview with Sharita after her morning shift at McDonald's was that even though she had gotten into Michigan State, she wasn't able to enroll because she had no place to stay and no way of paying her portion of the tuition. Sharita knew it would be difficult to iron these things out, but she assumed that GGC "had her back," that they would cover these details and make sure she was okay. After all, her case worker knew her circumstances, and she had even had several conversations with the executive director of the agency about these hurdles in the way of her success. In the middle of replaying for me one of the conversations she had had with the executive director prior to a board meeting, she stopped herself.

"She didn't hear a word I was saying." Sharita gave a short, bitter laugh as she thought about this. "She was so caught up in whether or not I was prepared for the presentation to the board." In the end, Sharita left the agency covered with accolades and followed by numerous false stories of her immediate future. She was too embarrassed at the time to reveal to anyone that she had no idea where she was really going or how she would take care of herself: "It felt so good to be on top, to be seen as a type of hero. I played along so well, I didn't even know how mad I was about to be." Sharita could still smile when recalling that feeling—one that still felt good in retrospect, even as she exposed the lies and betrayal that surrounded it.

Sharita had no choice but to figure out how to make it on her own. Getting support from her family was out of the question; there was too much

pain left from their abandonment of her. Even though they reached out to her when they started to get wind of her successes at Fresh Start and the possibility that she would be the first in their family to attend college, Sharita was not ready to forgive them. She was also too ashamed and too angry to go back to Fresh Start for help. She felt that the agency had an obligation to her that it had not fulfilled and that she had been used like a show pony to mask and prettify the shortcomings of both the shelter program and the young women who resided at Fresh Start. But Sharita was also determined not to tarnish the image of herself that she performed for the administration, a segment of the staff, and even some of the girls. It seemed difficult for her to untangle her own complicity in creating the façade. The cab that she was put in when leaving Fresh Start with much fanfare and ceremony drove her directly to another shelter. Sharita stayed there for a few weeks and then moved into an apartment with her current boyfriend. She contributed part of her small check to their shared household expenses, even though his income from selling weed and crack cocaine made this unnecessary.

"It is more about principle," Sharita told me. "I was always taught to make money and to be a contributor. Nobody will put up with a gold digger for very long. Plus, it just isn't my style."

Sharita had to move forward, and so did GGC. There were others like Sharita who came and went after serving their time as role models and superficial representations of the agency's success and the possibilities for homeless and high-risk young women if they were just "given a chance."[14]

The circumstances that brought Sharita to the shelter and the ways in which her attitude was read as good-natured and proactive made her story a narrative of both redemption and exception in the context of Fresh Start. Rebecca Wanzo's incisive work on the affective agency of Black women illuminates the difficulties Black women face in being seen as sympathetic objects worthy of media and political concern. Wanzo's term "sentimental political storytelling" (2009, 19) refers to the practice of narrating sympathetic stories for the purposes of political mobilization. However, Black women have a limited range of affective narrative tropes that they can access to tell stories about themselves that move a populace and produce institutional effects. Narratives that involve a transformation from tragedy or degradation to uplift allow Black women to become legible in the larger society and, possibly, to be considered subjects worthy

of sympathy and concern. Sentimental political storytelling, as well as neoconfessional narratives that overpopulate the self-help phenomena of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, eliminates the larger social and historical context so that the individual is charged with her own transformation.

These transformations are legible, then, through optimistic stories of overcoming. Histories of racist oppression and structural inequalities disappear in these narratives, to be replaced by tales of individual ascendency through tenacity, self-revelation, and often humility. Although race, gender, and geographic location shape a woman's current circumstances, she must talk about unfortunate events as intensified, instead of remedied, by the choices individual actors (usually also poor and Black) made after the events. In Sharita's case, the event was the fire in her apartment building that could have been prevented had the landlord in her low-income community been held to the same safety codes and legal obligations of landlords in wealthier neighborhoods. The choice was her family's dismissal of her after the fire. The question of accountability in terms of who or what is actually to blame for a shelter resident's current state of homelessness and the corresponding acts of neglect, abuse, and abandonment is asked in the context of family members and partners, whose actions or nonactions are recounted as separate from the larger political and economic context in which they occur. In this way, individual relationships can also become sites for redemption by being repaired through counseling and monitoring by the state. But most often these relationships are severed, allowing the young woman to move forward unfettered and isolated, a lone agent expected to be able to choose healthier bonds of care and attachment in the future. Sharita's family was the villain in her story of redemption, and her biography gained traction from the narrative of familial betrayal, her physical appearance (light-skinned, attractive, and overtly feminine), and her demeanor of competence and resiliency. Sharita had fallen (or was tripped) but, apparently, had the strength of character to care for herself and set off on a track of academic success that would secure her rise from the ashes. All of these factors enabled Sharita to embody proper victim status.

At Fresh Start redemption is ultimately a lonely endeavor, despite the number of staff members officially responsible for assisting young women out of homelessness and into new independent living situations. This is primarily why Sharita felt so isolated both while she lived in the shelter

and after she had discharged herself. Redemption narratives require the subject of the story to agree to hold no one but her- or himself accountable for what happens after the tragedy and before the transformation. In this way, redemption narratives are in direct opposition to the sense of entitlement that Janice exhibits. Emerging like a phoenix from the ashes, the redeemed Black girl is expected to fly without seeking redress or leveling accusations. Entitled young Black women, who understand the contradictions in being asked to climb a ladder of success built on their exclusion, rummage through the ashes to find the source of what must surely be arson. Redemption narratives, on the other hand, require both faith in the interlocking social systems that made the subject worthy of redemption in the first place and silence about the culpability of the neoliberal state. Sharita's redemption narrative was so powerfully persuasive as a success story in the shelter, and, in part, as a source of her own identity that even with the possibility of financial support and a new plan for success through Fresh Start's counseling services, she would rather not disrupt the false coherence of the narrative arc. Sharita also suspected that the agency would be less likely to assist her, given what would be seen as her failed attempt at redemption.

In any given year, the Fresh Start shelter took in as many as 150 new residents whose histories prior to coming to the shelter were as complicated and diverse as they were. Yet the narratives that were apparently seen as most credible and were best understood by the shelter staff were those that appeared to require redemption or present young women as exceptions. Sharita's circumstances meant that she fit in both categories. Narratives of exception at Fresh Start imply an exception to the rules of what it means to be a young woman who is Black and also homeless in Detroit. In other words, exception refers to Black girls who have achieved a remarkable measure of normative success. But, as is evidenced in Sharita's story, exceptionalism can also be performed. In fact, it is always performed regardless of the credibility of the actual story. Style of dress, speech patterns and comfort in communicating with adults and white people, how little or much space you take up, and knowing when and how to do this are examples of how narratives of exception were validated through the performance of success in the shelter. Young women whose lives seemed to make them likely prospects for successful redemption through the shelter or who came to the shelter in ways that appeared incredible due to their status as undergraduate students or history of having a normative

familial structure, for example, appeared to have an easy time in and beyond the shelter. They did not have to work as hard to be visible or to make the kinds of credible claims that motivated staff members and other residents to support them, whether emotionally or through material and social resources.

Some of the young women challenged these narrative tropes when others applied them to their biographies, but these residents found that it was hard to articulate their reality in ways that would be heard and receive a productive response. Stories staff members talked about as not making sense or sounding confusing were usually thought to be so because they not only didn't conform to the structure of the redemption or exception narrative, but they also confounded the usual strategies for the shelter to educate, train, discipline, or transform. What, for example, do you do with the young woman whose homelessness can't be tied to her lack of skills, drive, or education; or pinned on poor choices or unfortunate family circumstances, but who knows that her life is not an exception, that there are Black girls throughout Detroit and beyond—some homeless, some not—whose life stories will never cohere in a society that chooses to see and react to them as dichotomous tropes: victim or perpetrator, perpetual failure or incomprehensible success. In redemption narratives, race and structural oppression are absented from the discussion. In exception narratives, race shows up but only as a way to explain why a Black girl's apparent success is so unexpected and exceptional. The obstacle in the case of the exception narrative is her inferiority and inadequate aptitude due to her Blackness, not the institutional racism to which she is subjected.

Redemption and exception are susceptible to being read through the dichotomous lens of authenticity or respectability. Redemption stories appeared authentic—the true and believable life paths of homeless Black girls—while also validating the shelter as savior and transformer. And even though the real work of transforming was believed to occur through individual determination and self-reliance, these individual acts constituted the larger institutional narrative of assisting many individual girls in pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Exceptions or exceptional girls and women had already been branded with the respectability stamp of approval. The fact that Fresh Start provides services to girls and young women reflected an underlying gendered analysis of the unique needs and vulnerabilities of girls. GGC's gender-specific services included identifying the determinants of risky behavior as it related to girls and implementing

curricula across the programs that spoke to these findings. This is why a mainstream white liberal girl-power feminism permeated the organization without a corresponding critique of how race necessarily shaped the lives of the young Black women Fresh Start served.