Chapter 5

Thugs, Black Divas, and Gendered Aspirations

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Young, low-income black women in Detroit, by definition, live at the intersection of age, class, race, gender, and place. Positioned on the wrong side of these socially constructed identity markers, these young women must negotiate the boundaries of respectability and deviance most often erected in the space where race and sexuality meet. In addition to their network of family, friends, and coworkers, many of these young women are also immersed in a web of social service institutions that inform the way they perceive the possibilities not only for achieving social mobility but also for defining and expressing their identities.

This essay presents ethnographic data from over four years of fieldwork with the young female residents of the Fresh Start homeless shelter in Detroit to contextualize an analysis of how the sexual identities of low-income, young black women are framed by the racialized and class-based expectations of nonprofit community organizations, the welfare system, and vocational training programs. Young black women living in postindustrial Detroit must navigate these overlapping social service networks daily and, in the process, discover the most efficacious strategies for achieving their self-defined measures of success. This current work emerges from a larger book project that considers more broadly how an ideology of self-improvement, embedded within the context of leveled opportunities, impacts the shelter residents’ ability to get ahead. Here, I am concerned with how the young women rework, maneuver within, and disrupt identity categories in ways that demonstrate their sophistication in subverting the race and gender hierarchies that threaten their life chances. In claiming ownership of their ability to define and continually redefine their sexual identities, while staging performances of self in public and private spaces, the young black women of Fresh Start reveal their understanding of gender and its expression as inherently dynamic and unstable. I also discuss how different notions of normative sexuality and gendered respectability among black girls and women are promoted in the client—social worker relationship. The themes addressed in this article are critical to considerations of
how state institutions and neoliberal models of social service constrain the possibilities for self-identification and sexual expression among individuals living in under resourced urban communities of color.

_Divas, thugs, and wannabes_ are labels that both residents and staff at the Fresh Start shelter attached to certain shelter residents to define their gendered behaviors, relationships to men, and assumed sexuality. Like all tropes, these identifications were imperfect, ill-fitting terms rooted largely in stereotypes and, in this case, the possibilities for who and what young black women could be within certain social and institutional settings. Within Fresh Start, _divas_ referred to young women who cultivated hyperfeminine personas through their style of dress and grooming, which often included form-fitting trendy clothing, air-brushed acrylic nails, and well-maintained elaborate hairstyles. In addition, divas kept up a reputation for having simultaneous multiple boyfriends that they juggled and manipulated to meet their material and emotional needs. _Thugs_ were the shelter residents who openly claimed a lesbian identity and whose oversized clothes, close-cropped or unstyled hair, and “hard” demeanor led the Fresh Start staff and other residents to assume that they were performing a version of masculinity. The _wannabes_ were residents who were thought to be mimicking the physicality and appearance of the thugs, while pretending to be attracted to women, so as to gain some of the respect and deference the thugs were afforded both within and outside of the shelter setting.

Certainly, these three identity types in no way fully define the young women placed under each banner nor do they account for the wide spectrum of diversity found among the nearly 150 young women who resided at Fresh Start for varying lengths of time during the course of a calendar year. My intention in focusing on the divas, thugs and wannabes is to highlight the ways of being in the body, in both the corporeal and behavioral sense, that were most salient at Fresh Start as meaningful and socially productive (or destructive) types. The legibility of the divas, thugs and wannabes as physical types with corresponding desires, motives, and actions highlights the race and gender discourses that establish the parameters within which young black women of a certain class must negotiate processes of self-identification. The status of diva, thug or wannabe represents the limits to understanding young black women’s full personhood and complicated positionality within social services. However, these tropes also provide room to consider how young women, often perceived as marginal and ineffectual, actively rework and reconstitute the social contexts, institutional spaces, and urban geographies that are usually identified as unilaterally defining their existence. This reciprocity between constituting bodies and constructing spaces is a critical relationship to explore. This is especially true if our political goals include propelling the theoretical discussion of power into a realm where the everyday, and seemingly mundane, individual acts of oppression that take place within state-sponsored projects can be identified and eventually disrupted. In the introduction to _Black Geographies_, McKittrick and Woods urge scholars to uncover how “black human geographies are implicated in the production of space” and where these geographies “disclose how the racialized production of space is made possible in the explicit demarcations of the spaces of les damnés as invisible/forgettable at the