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Girls Empowerment Project

The potential of places like GEP . . . starting from when you're a child, when you know that there are successful Black women . . . that we contributed so much . . . and not only that that we're beautiful—that it's alright for us to be different shapes and shades and our hair to be different textures. And that's not what this society teaches. But if you have places like GEP where you see that, constantly see that and it's not in a negative light or it's not in something someone made up on television but it is something that is real. That's showing much love to me. . . . Places like GEP are necessary, definitely necessary, to excise white supremacy. Definitely necessary! . . . If I had GEP when I was that age, Lord have Mercy, I don't know where I would be right now. (Aisha, age twenty-four, program coordinator)

Recognizing the daily assaults on Black girls, GEP was created to be a place where girls and staff could challenge and confront representations and practices that limited and degraded the aspirations and lives of low-income Black girls. It was designed to be a social space where women and girls could work on themselves outside the “gaze” of dominant and indigenous groups and “go about the business of fashioning themselves” (O'Neale 1986, 139, as quoted in Collins 1991, 95). In this chapter, I describe GEP and the community in which it was located. I also detail my own involvement with the organization and the research process.

In the spring of 1991, Melinda George, the cofounder of Bay City's Women's Building and the city's first battered women's shelter, created the Girls Leadership Project. At this time Melinda, a well-known White feminist organizer and successful nonprofit program developer within Bay City's women's and philanthropic communities, secured a \$50,000 planning grant to investigate the needs as well as resources available in Bay City for girls. In this formative stage, Melinda teamed up with Chris, an African American community activist known for representing the interests of low-income public housing residents. During this initial period, both women met with staff at numerous public and private agencies to ascertain what services were available as well as what was needed for girls. They also interviewed fifty-five girls to get their perspectives on what kinds of programming they liked and wanted (GEP 1992b, 7).

As part of this phase, the two women created an interim steering committee composed of a diverse group of community leaders, activists, youth workers, educators, social service providers, and public housing residents, who began to formulate plans for a leadership and self-esteem program for low-income girls. I was a part of this committee. We wrote:

We, the Girls Leadership Project, are developing a program for girls designed to attract and reach girls where they are, and provide leadership, self-esteem, empowerment, and economic development skills. It will be located on-site in a public housing development in Bay City and shaped by girls themselves, by women who work with girls, and by residents of the community. Because of the demographics of who is poor and at the highest risk in the city, the first program will be targeted primarily to African American girls and developed within a context of Afrocentric cultural values. (Women's Building 1992)

This committee, composed of eight African American women and two White women, eventually became GEP's Executive Management Committee. Over nine months, we met to create the Girls Empowerment Program (GEP): "A Program for Inner City Mothers of Tomorrow" (GEP 1992b, 1). It is hard to describe the excitement I felt as we worked to create GEP. I truly believed I was working to create deep change for and with women and girls I cared about. Once GEP opened, I transitioned into a member of the board of directors. In this role, I continued to work with other women to dream and envision an organization before heading off to graduate school.

GEP's first years were volatile. There were lawsuits, financial challenges, and struggles over space and the housing of the program, and within weeks of being hired, GEP's first executive director was let go. Despite these chal-

lenges, the program kept its promise to serve the girls of Sun Valley. At the time of this research, the agency had served at least 100 girls annually for thirteen years.¹

SUN VALLEY

Living in Sun Valley is great, once you get used to it. The bad thing about Sun Valley is that there are too many gangsters. (Tenda, GEP girl age twelve)

My experience with Sun Valley and some of the people has been frightening and at times hectic. Nowadays you can't be hanging out late without the fear of getting shot, raped, and even kidnapped. These things happen everywhere, but in a neighborhood such as mine, it is almost expected to happen, because bad things have always happened. I usually cry myself to sleep knowing when I wake up I will still be in Sun Valley, in the projects, in the ghetto, as usual. (Tracy, GEP girl age sixteen)

Living in Sun Valley feels nice, and I feel kind of safe. Some people around my neighborhood treat me well. Other people don't say anything to me. When there are drive-bys or when someone has a knife or when there is fighting, I don't feel safe. I stay inside when these things are happening, because I feel uncomfortable. If I could change anything about Sun Valley, I would try to ask everyone to help clean our community. I would ask people to plant flowers and have butterflies flying around. (Nikki, GEP girl age eleven)

I don't like Sun Valley. It's dirty, stanky, messy, dookie. It's difficult seeing drunk people and stuff—people robbing people and stuff. (Diamond, GEP girl age twelve)

It isn't that bad living in Sun Valley, because there is lots of loving in Sun Valley. There are people that give support and love in Sun Valley. (Portia, GEP girl age eleven)

During the summer of 1993, GEP opened its doors in Sun Valley, the largest of the forty-eight public housing developments in Bay City. Descending the hill into Sun Valley was like entering another world. Housed on forty-nine acres and home to approximately 2,000 residents, Sun Valley contained over 750 units, as compared to other public housing developments in the city,

which ranged from fifty to 250 units. Nestled in a valley, the development contrasted sharply with the surrounding cities' row houses and apartments. Strangely, there was a sense of space here, endlessness in the midst of intense crowding.

Sun Valley was developed in 1940 as "Whites-only" transitional housing for young, working-class families in the postwar economy.² By the 1950s, the development was integrated, albeit segregated. That is, Whites lived in one section, Latinos in another, and African Americans in yet another (Peacock 1999). Between the 1950s and the 1970s, many small businesses were located along Sun Valley Avenue, the main corridor running through the development. According to local residents, however, the 1960s brought great changes to this neighborhood. The shift from a manufacturing to a service economy resulted in massive economic dislocations. Whites moved out. A "rougher" crowd moved in, and "drugs and purse snatching" became more prevalent (Peacock 1999).³ By the 1970s, small businesses had left the area due to robberies, fire, shoplifting, and vandalism.

Here in this urban landscape, race, class, and gender oppression converged, and they were often experienced as poverty, poor education, poor health, violence, and incarceration. For example, in 1993, the year GEP opened its doors, 46 percent of African American children lived in poverty or near poverty nationwide. Of this number, almost 10 percent lived in deep poverty, with family incomes 50 percent below the poverty line (Bennett 1995). These figures were mirrored within Bay City. For example, while only 10 percent of the city's overall population was African American, 64 percent of the youth residing in public housing were African American (SFHA 1992). In addition, Blacks in Bay City constituted 43.4 percent of the city's AFDC clients (SFDSS 1992).

Moreover, the growth of technology and internet industries in Silicon Valley further exacerbated the two-tiered labor divide in Bay City. These industries created a class of young professionals with large amounts of disposable income that transformed the economic and social character of Bay City. Between 1994 and 1996, the gap between the rich and the poor within Bay City increased by nearly 40 percent. This was the largest two-year increase in the twenty years covered by the survey (Zoll 1998). Housing prices soared, and many poor, working-class, and middle-class Black families were pushed out of their homes and into the streets or outside of Bay City to lower-rent, lower-mortgage communities. Between 1990 and 2000, Bay City's African American population dropped by 15 percent. This was the highest rate of decline found across the nation's fifty most populous cities (McCormick 2001). Many of those who did stay were residents of public housing that were too poor to move.

Adding to these economic realities, the triple impact of crack addiction, HIV infection, and imprisonment devastated many Black families. Children were orphaned and pushed into foster care systems, cared for by grandparents, or moved among various family members. According to *The New York Times*, at one urban middle school in Bay City, almost two-thirds of the students were newly orphaned, with 50 percent living with their grandparents (Navarro 1992). Many young people were forced to raise themselves, some joined “sets,” and some sold crack to support themselves and their families.⁴

These were the realities of young girls in Sun Valley at the time that GEP was founded. During this period, Sun Valley was considered the most dangerous public housing development in Bay City. It had one of the highest rates of violence of any neighborhood in the city, averaging five to ten homicides a year (GEP 1992b). Most of the homicides and assaults were the result of drive-by shootings, characteristic of the crack trade. Throughout the neighborhood, abandoned cars dotted the parking lots. Trash lined the streets and covered the so-called “yards.” The air was filled with dirt and debris whipped up by the strong winds and lack of plant life to hold the soil. Makeshift memorials dedicated to fallen homies, fathers, sons, and brothers sprinkled the landscape.

Between 1993 and 2000, however, Sun Valley experienced many changes. GEP’s administrative director, a former resident of Sun Valley, remarked:

I’ve seen Sun Valley go from the comfort zone in ‘67 to what they call the swamp, with no grass. It had drive-bys. It was not a good thing out here. I’ve seen the physical appearance go back to what it was in ‘67. I think some of it is the repercussions of what transpired in between the wars, the drive-bys, . . . the drug dealing . . . they have come a long way in cleaning the community, but I think it has left a scar, and I don’t know if it will ever get back to where it was as a community, but it’s getting better and I think a lot of it has to do with our girls. (Roxanne, age fifty-four)

Similarly, Kim, a resident of Sun Valley off and on for fourteen years, noted:

There used to be a lot of shooting, and driving up on sidewalks when the twins was [sic] little. When they were babies they’d be running from cars up on the sidewalks, playgrounds, police chasing. Now since they got the Beijings (local slang for Housing Authority’s private security force) it’s calmed down a bit, it’s even better. They started looking better. (mother of GEP girls, age thirty-five)

Finally, sixteen-year-old Tracy reflected:

I see that Sun Valley has changed from a place where people were shooting bullets to a place where people are shooting out paint for the houses, grass for the lawns, and a remodeled home to live in. I like Sun Valley for these reasons and because it is a place where everyone knows each other. (GEP girl)

Sun Valley had indeed changed. The development's townhouses and apartments had been remodeled and given fresh coats of pastel paints. Grass covered what were once dirt yards. Sun Towers, a twenty-story twin tower structure that housed between 2,000 and 3,000 residents, was demolished and replaced by new low-income townhouses.

Most important, as both the adults and girls noted, the increase in both public and private security forces "calmed" Sun Valley "down a bit." During this period, a new police substation was placed inside an apartment located at the center of the development. In addition, Bay City's Housing Authority implemented a controversial housing policy that evicted residents who were themselves drug dealers or who harbored known drug dealers. They also hired, "The Beijings," a paramilitary-clad private security company to patrol the development. The result was that many of the young men, often the perpetrators and targets of the violence, were removed from the neighborhood via the new housing policy, incarceration, forced relocation for safety, and, in some cases, death.

Despite the decrease in violence, during the research period Sun Valley was still extremely impoverished and isolated from city services and other parts of the city. In 1998, the average household income within the development totaled approximately \$9,000, with 65 percent of all the families receiving some form of public assistance (SFHA 1998). As of 2007, little had changed. For example, while Blacks comprised only 8 percent of the total population of Bay City, they represented 70 percent of the residents of Sun Valley. Within this community, women headed 90 percent of the households, and the average household income totaled approximately \$12,726, with 65 percent of all the families receiving some form of public assistance (SFHA 2007). Public transportation service to and from this area remained poor; there were no large grocery stores, banks, or gas stations in the area. Only one gated and barred convenience store stood as a reminder of the small business community that once thrived along Sun Valley Avenue.

As a result of this isolation, the African American community within Sun Valley was very close-knit. Families appeared to know each other, or at least know of each other. Many were related, and those that were not were made family by adding "Auntie" or "play" in front of "sista," "cousin," or

“mama.” This enmeshment could be found in the many informal child care and transportation arrangements.⁵ For example, Esther, a GEP parent honored at the organization’s five-year anniversary celebration for her leadership and courage in shaping a better world, served as a community othermother who raised her own five children plus informally raised two nieces and four neighborhood girls. If you wanted to know what was going on in Sun Valley or with GEP girls, you asked Esther. Neighbors sought her out for advice and assistance, and she often referred both girls and their caregivers to GEP.

INSIDE GEP

Within the Sun Valley community, GEP had a strong and growing presence. When the organization first opened its doors, it shared a space inside the local Boys and Girls Club at the center of the housing development. During the research period, however, GEP had three locations within the Sun Valley community: the administrative office, the “Village” site, and the bungalow. GEP’s administrative office was located along Sun Valley Avenue in one of the renovated townhouses. In many ways this office was the “adult space.” The executive director and administrative director had offices at this location. Administrative business and weekly staff meetings took place within this structure. This was also where the parents and other adults of the community went for support. In 1998, GEP opened the village office, a satellite site within a community center that housed service providers for the displaced residents of the demolished Sun Towers. This site was home to the director of programs, the girls’ advocate, and group C, the fifteen-to-eighteen-year-old girls who attended the program.

The heart of the program, however, was the small, light-blue bungalow located at the edge of the development. The bungalow was a single-story structure consisting of three “classrooms,” a kitchen area and two bathrooms surrounded by a six-foot-high industrial-strength fence. As you entered the gated area, you were immediately aware of the garden. Maintained by girls, staff, and a dedicated core of volunteers, the garden featured cherry tomatoes, rosemary, lavender, strawberries, lemon grass, medicinal herbs, vegetables, and flowers. In the spring, it appeared as an oasis of life and beauty in the otherwise dusty, urban environment. Situated on a hill, the front of the bungalow looked down at row upon row of townhouses, while the back looked up and away from the community. Its physical location was symbolic: while this was a program for the young women of the community, it was not necessarily from or of this community but negotiated an uneasy tension between these worlds.

Once inside the bungalow, you knew you had entered a space for Black women and girls. Couches, pillows, and rugs dotted the interior, and the walls were covered with photos, posters, artwork, and poetry celebrating the legacy, creativity, and beauty of Black women and girls. Through the main door, you looked directly into the kitchen area, which contained a refrigerator, a sink, lots of cabinets, and a series of hotplates. To the left was the group B (twelve-to-fifteen-year-old girls) space. This area consisted of two rooms: the “chill-out” room, which was also home to the program’s impressive library, and group B’s work area. The walls in group B were lined with the program coordinator’s desk, four computer work spaces, and a printer. On the back wall, above the couch, were seven human torso silhouettes akin to those used in gun target practice. Each torso was surrounded by the words “They’re out to get me . . .”

Figure 1.1
They’re Out to Get Me

They’re out to get me	cuz I’m Black
They’re out to get me	cuz I’m smart
They’re out to get me	cuz I’m pretty
They’re out to get me	cuz I’m female
They’re out to get me	cuz I’m strong
They’re out to get me	cuz I’m from the ghetto

The girls’ statements, combined with the images, created a powerful impact. Something different was at work here, and it was this difference that was the spark and spirit of the organization.

Returning to the entry area, down the narrow hallway, and past the bathrooms was the group A area. Shaped like a rectangle, this side of the bungalow was much more open. It was a perfect fit for the twenty-five-plus energetic eight-to-eleven-year-old girls who made it their home each day. Off to the sides were computers and staff desks. The back wall contained four large windows that allowed plenty of light into the space. Along the front wall was a collage of Black women and girls. “I am” poems, written by the younger girls, hung above the images.

I AM
I am beautiful, kind, and smart
I wonder what I am going to be

I hear the troubles of the world
I see the world coming to an end
I want the rest of my life to be good

I AM
I am beautiful and funny
I wonder if the world can see my beauty
I hear the sounds of the sky
I see flowers when I dream
I want to make this world a better place
I am a beautiful shimmershine queen

I AM
I say that I am special
I touch the insides of my feelings
I say I can do it everyday
I pretend to be a grown lady
I dream about a good future
I say hello to God

I AM
I am intelligent and caring
I hope for blessings
I want to be myself
I am an African American girl who wonders about my life

Within each of the poems, GEP girls unapologetically and poignantly explored and expressed what it meant to be a young African American girl. Carried in these words were their hopes, fears, expectations, triumphs, and losses. These “I Am” poems spoke to GEP’s construction as a space of their own, as a second home. This construction was also evident in the girls’ daily routines, practices, and lessons that emphasized academic excellence, economic development, leadership development, reproductive health, and racial and gender pride.

THE DAILY FLOW

Group A girls, those between eight and eleven years old, began arriving around 2 p.m. These girls, known to staff as the early arrivals, received individual attention and focused academic help. During these moments, the bungalow was quiet. By 3 p.m., however, the energy and pace shifted, and at

least twenty girls moved about the space. On the group A side, it seemed as if all the girls needed homework help, at once! Homework was their first order of business. It was what the girls, parents, and staff all said they wanted and one of the primary reasons the girls attended GEP instead of the recreation program down the hill. However, the homework period was not without contestation and signaled at the micropolitics and power negotiations that occurred on both a large and small scale within the organization.

As the noise level in the room rose, Aisha, the group A coordinator, shouted, "Fists go up!" Half of the girls responded, "Mouths go shut." Aisha repeated the call and this time the whole group responded, "Mouths go shut." As silence returned to the room, Aisha reminded the girls that this was the time for homework and that she would be moving around the room to help them. She tried to manage the demands on her time by grouping together the girls who had the same homework. This was somewhat effective, as the girls did help each other—often by sharing their answers. Every day at least two girls announced that they did not have homework, or, rather, that they had completed their homework at school. If the weather permitted, Aisha encouraged the girls to go outside and work in the garden. If the garden volunteer was not there, then often the girls resisted. They wanted to get on the computers to visit the girls visited their favorite entertainers' Web sites or download and print popular rap lyrics—lyrics that attracted the attention of the other girls. The girls were redirected—often!

Group B, on the other hand, used the time between 3 and 4 p.m. to "chill out." This was their time to check in with Maya, their coordinator, and each other. During this period, some girls went to the group A side to tutor the younger girls, others surfed the Net, and still others checked in and chatted. Their daily schedule consisted of check-in, snack, group, and then homework. Most girls arrived by 4 p.m. and in time for snack. Once snack was completed, the girls moved into "group" and the thematic lesson for the day.

Group was the heart of GEP curriculum. At GEP, group simultaneously referred to the form, content, and teaching process found within the organization. It was the space in the program where girls participated in experiential exercises, media literacy activities, or discussions that focused on what was important in the young women's lives, especially factors that impinged upon their life choices. Group curriculum was organized by the days of the week. For example, Monday was reproductive health (formerly pregnancy prevention), Tuesday was leadership development (formerly violence prevention), Wednesday was academic enrichment, Thursday was economic development, and Friday was gender and ethnic pride. Of course, these days shifted and changed depending on program needs and staff changes, but this

was the basic structure. There were also special events that influenced the curriculum flow: the Black herstory celebration, the community Kwanzaa celebration, and anniversary events. These events served as vehicles for organizing curriculum units and demonstrating the girls' acquisition of new skills and knowledge. Within this loose structure, GEP staff organized and created the daily lesson plans.

For example, at GEP's five-year anniversary celebration, held in October 1998, the showcase event was "The Front Porch Dialogue: Conversations across the Generations." This conversation, a combination of performance art and loosely scripted discussions, brought together selected Black girls and women ranging from ages eleven to seventy to share Black females' multi-generational stories across several issues: teen pregnancy, poverty, HIV and AIDS, domestic violence, and gender and racial oppression.

Eleven-year-old Shayla opened the dialogue with the following poem:

Girls are different than boys
They have different clothes and different toys
Girls have to worry about breast cancer, getting pregnant,
and puberty
Young girls having babies worries me
If a boy hits on a woman he is not a man
I don't have to depend on a man because I can do for myself . . .

Before she was able to finish, the audience stood to acknowledge and celebrate her declaration of independence, female strength, and awareness of female "troubles." In fact, Shayla ended her performance on this note, leaving her poem unfinished and me with several questions regarding the process by which Shayla both created her poem and prepared for the event.

To produce the text for this performance, Shayla participated in group. As part of the five-year celebration activities, GEP sponsored an essay contest. To help the girls compose their essays, the staff gave the following writing prompts: What do you like about being a girl? What are some of the problems facing girls? In response to these questions, Shayla wrote a letter to Rosa Parks:

Dear Ms. Rosa Parks,
My name is Shayla . . . and I am eleven years old. I admire you because you made it possible for us to sit down in front of the bus.
I like being a girl because you can go to clubs and programs. Girls can go to programs to help them learn about pregnancy, having children, and having a good life. If I could change some

things, I would stop men from hitting women and having sex with women and then leaving them. I would stop men from calling women out of their names. Women get upset when these things happen to them and they feel sad.

I am writing to you, Rosa Parks, because you are special to me.
 . . . You are a special woman, a hero, and a role model.

Once a draft of the essay was completed, the staff worked closely with Shayla and the other girls to help them refine and organize their ideas. During this revision process, the girls and the staff came together to discuss issues raised by the young women in their essays. These issues included but were not limited to teen pregnancy, domestic violence, and discrimination. In other words, the girls participated in group.

Group was the space within the program where GEP women and girls discussed sex, sexuality, violence, power, and inequality, as well as Blackness, femininity, and girlhood. It was a space that I returned to often throughout this project to understand how Black women and girls go about the “business of fashioning themselves” and what factors influenced such processes.

REFLECTING ON ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

I conducted the field research for this project in the San Francisco Bay Area from August 1998 to May 2000. My initial contact with the organization occurred in 1992. At that time I was approached by the two planning directors and invited to join a committee to create an after-school program for girls living in low-income housing. This committee eventually became GEP’s Executive Management Committee, which created and opened GEP. I became a member of the board of directors for the organization. As a member of the board, I hired and fired two executive directors, and saw GEP through its very rough first year before heading off to begin my graduate studies at Yale University. While at Yale, I kept in touch with the planning director and made periodic visits to the site. This connection not only influenced my intellectual and research interests but also my entry into the site.

As a graduate student, I knew I wanted to think through my experiences at GEP. The turn of events that occurred at the organization did not neatly correspond to the literature on safe spaces and women’s and girls’ empowerment. At GEP, instead of alliances along race and gender lines, I witnessed women and girls struggling with and against each other to construct and perform respectable and respected Black femininities. Additionally, these conflicts did not seem to be the result of “crazy personalities,” poor management, or incorrigible girls. Rather, I suspected that systemic forces were the cause of

staff dissatisfaction, survey reports of girls' anger, and the staff's and girls' conflicts regarding power and decision making.

When I conceived of my project and GEP looked like a match, I consulted with members of my dissertation committee as well as the GEP community about my research project. During the prospectus phase of my dissertation, I contacted GEP's executive director and we discussed my project. I told her that I was interested in how women who work with girls and the girls themselves imagine Black womanhood, and that I was particularly interested in GEP because of its Africentric womanist philosophical foundation. At that time, I offered to conduct an evaluation of the organization as an exchange of sorts for access to the site.

During the summer of 1998, my whole family, that is, my husband, my infant daughter, and I, made the cross-country journey back to the Bay Area. Unfortunately, we were not adequately prepared for changes in the Bay Area rental or job market. So when I went to discuss my research and was offered a job with the program, I did not refuse. During my job interview, with both staff and girls, my academic life was discussed in detail. They asked me about my research topic, how much time my research would take, whether it would interfere with my job performance, and how they could support me so that my studies would not suffer. I tried to explain, as someone who had just completed her proposal could, what I was interested in as a researcher, what I needed to complete my dissertation, and my time line. In fact, the executive director told me, "It is important to this organization, to all of us as Black women, that you finish, that you succeed in your work. To ensure that I am doing my part, during our supervision meetings I will be asking you about your school work." In addition, during my first year of employment at GEP, I attended a weekly seminar at U.C. Berkeley. Among staff and girls, my status as a student was out, yet my status as a researcher was often cloudy.

At first I thought that working at my primary research site was the ideal situation. In my mind I was getting paid to do my research. However, I quickly learned that my research would soon take a back seat to my work requirements. The position was incredibly demanding. As the director of programs, my job was to coordinate the delivery of services so that the organization remained true to its vision as well as complied with its grants and contracts. I supervised the four to eight direct service staff, as well as various consultants and volunteers who provided direct services to the girls. I soon found that keeping up with field notes for forty-plus hours in the field was overwhelming. To make the process of capturing my observations more manageable, I resorted to daily journal entries that documented what I saw, what I heard, what I thought, and how I felt.

As an employee, I was also concerned about the power imbalances at play within the organization. Feminist scholars note that identity plays an

important role in the relationship between the researcher and her research participants (Harding 1987; Smith 1987; Collins 1991; Reinhartz 1992). However, while I am an African American woman examining the experiences of predominately African American women and girls, I could not depend upon some “essentialized Blackness or womanness” as automatic passes into the world of GEP. I had to take into account the class, generational, and cultural differences that came into play. To not have done so would have been a serious methodological and sociological mistake.

I occupied varied identities and positions within GEP. Within this community of women and girls, I was a Midwestern mother and wife and perceived as privileged, and specifically middle class, based upon my educational achievement and position within the organization. Within the organizational hierarchy, I was being supervised and I was a supervisor. I was also an adult and a former member of the board of directors—considered a “founder,” no less. These relationships were fraught with tension, such that layering the researcher-subject power dynamic on top felt incredibly uncomfortable.

During the year and a half that I worked at GEP, I conducted three interviews for a seminar paper. After each of these interviews there was a strange “morning-after effect.” I am referring to the awkwardness that can sometimes occur after we have been intimate or shared something important with another person. For me this was intensified for two reasons: First, I was asking the staff to blur the already fragile boundaries that were in place around work or professional relationships by sharing with me their girlhoods, values, and beliefs. Second, the one-sidedness of the conversations made the disclosures feel very imbalanced. At the end of my first staff interview, Maya remarked, “Wow, by the time this is over, you’ll know a lot about all of us, but we still don’t know a lot about you.” What was very interesting was that even when I tried to shift the interview into more of a conversation or dialogue, it was often resisted by the interviewees. For example, when I interjected my history or opinions, Maya would take back the space by looking at her watch or the clock, interrupting me, or in general acting bored. As soon as I asked another question that brought the attention back to her, the energy and interest returned. As a result of my concerns around power and my discomfort, the rest of the formal interviews were to wait until after I left my position with the organization in January 2000.

While I worked for GEP, I gathered organizational documents, took part in the day-to-day workings of the organization, and recorded what I called “hot spots” within the organizational milieu. “Hot spots,” are incidents, conversations, and/or long, drawn-out conflicts that I witnessed and experienced in the organization, and they were critical to the development of this proj-

ect. These hot spots were recorded in my field notes and included direct observations, recalled conversations, and my immediate analysis or questions concerning the event. During this period, I shared my fieldwork notes and emerging analyses with my writing group and faculty advisors. These conversations were critical in helping me maintain awareness of my biases, and my multiple positions within the organization. They kept in check both my romanticism and disillusionment. I also shared what I was learning and thinking with GEP staff members and girls. I often engaged the staff and girls in direct conversations about my course work and different theoretical approaches that I was “trying on” regarding women’s and girls’ resistance and empowerment. These were often lively conversations, during which time many of my “school” ideas were rejected, challenged, and considered. These conversations were equally important and created an ongoing opportunity for GEP members to engage and challenge me as a student, community member, and researcher. My shifting position within the organization provided me with multiple lenses through which to view the organization as well as be viewed by girls and GEP staff.

In addition, from 1999 to 2000, GEP underwent an extensive organizational evaluation, the goal of which was to develop a “replicable and powerful model” (GEP 1998). This capacity-building effort enabled staff and board members to think through the possibility of opening new sites, but most importantly it provided the resources necessary to evaluate and solidify the present work and services being delivered. It was an opportunity for the board, staff, and girls to talk “out loud” about the organization: its shortcomings and successes as well as personal hopes and dreams for the organization. The effort encouraged women and girls to make visible the invisible and to give voice to those silent spaces. It was also an opportunity for the residents and service providers of Sun Valley to think about GEP and the work carried out within and by the organization. I worked closely with the evaluators and, with clear permission from the researchers and GEP’s executive director, inserted questions into the process that I thought would not only be helpful and relevant to the evaluation process but also useful to my dissertation research. As part of this process, GEP girls, staff, board members, parents, and past participants were interviewed, completed questionnaires, and participated in focus groups. Useful information from this process has been incorporated into this text and duly cited.

After I terminated my position with GEP, I conducted formal interviews with GEP women and girls. I want to make clear that although my “official” power had come to an end, my continued relationship with the organization led staff members and the girls to continue viewing me as influential. During these interviews, both staff and girls would vent and “blow the whistle” on

particular staff and organizational practices they found troubling. Between January and September 2000, I interviewed thirteen or all of GEP staff members. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one and a half and three hours. Ten of the thirteen women identified as African American, three as of mixed racial descent. Five staff reported coming from a lower-middle to middle-middle class positions and eight from poor to working-class positions. The staff's educational background ranged from GEDs to MAs, with most having some college (including community college) but not a completed degree. While the staff ranged from ages eighteen to fifty-five, the program coordinators, who worked directly with the girls, were all young; most were in their early-to-late twenties. For many, youth work was their first work experience, and for some GEP was only their first or second salaried, as opposed to hourly, position.

I also conducted seventeen, semi-structured, tape recorded interviews with GEP girls that lasted between a half hour and two hours. While parental consent forms were distributed to all 35 GEP girls enrolled in the summer program, only seventeen were returned. These girls ranged from ages eight to seventeen, with nine girls between eight and eleven, five between twelve and fifteen, and three sixteen and above. These young women represented 65 percent of the core program participants, those girls who attend the program three to five days a week. Of the seventeen girls interviewed, thirteen self-identified as African American and four as mixed racial descent. All of the girls were residents of Sun Valley and/or had family that lived in the public housing development. Given public housing restrictions, it is not surprising that most, fifteen out of seventeen, reported living in a female-headed household, though not always with their biological mothers. Additionally, sixteen out of seventeen reported being eligible for free or reduced-fee lunch. On average, the girls had attended the program between two and five years.

The interview protocol developed for this study asked girls and staff to share their experiences with GEP, what they liked about the organization, what they disliked, what changes they would make, and their sense of power within and outside of GEP. To begin the interview, girls and staff completed a brief demographic questionnaire. The interviews provided the girls and staff an opportunity to tell me in their own words and in response to direct questions what they thought and why it mattered.

Once transcribed, I read and reread the interview transcripts, supporting documents, and my ongoing field notes to see what patterns and themes emerged from the data. Using the work of Frankenberg (1993) and Luttrell (1997) as working models, I began to analyze the narratives in terms of internal coherence, in relation to each other, and in context of a broader social history (Frankenberg 1993, 42). In my reading and analysis, I focused on

places where girls and staff addressed their ideas and feelings about voice, choice, and power within the organization and beyond. Once identified, I reread the transcripts and documents, highlighting and coding for these themes.

At this time I also conducted formal observations. During my visits, I would hang out in the bungalow with the staff and the girls. I also attended special events hosted by the organization. For example, I attended several Black herstory celebrations and Kwanzaa events. While observing, I was particularly interested in the ways that staff and girls talked about power, empowerment, and Black womanhood. I was also interested in the constructions of femininity that GEP participants, staff, board members, and parents were using. Such cultural scripts tell us about what is acceptable and unacceptable. While it was always clear that portions of the cultural scripts of Black femininity shared elements with White middle-class, or what Collins (2004) would call “hegemonic” femininity, I was curious where these converged and differed.

Finally, between March 2000 and August 2000, I visited four girl-serving organizations in the Bay Area: a private Catholic all-girls high school, a girls-only program in a neighboring public housing development, a Girls Inc. program, and a program for young women in the street economy. In addition, I participated in a videotaped roundtable discussion with six girl-serving organizations in the Bay Area. The purpose of visiting these programs and participating in these discussions was twofold: one, to see if what I was observing at my primary site was the result of some idiosyncratic processes, or if they were common to other girl-serving organizations and to what extent; and, two, because the visits allowed me to locate GEP within the world of girl-serving organizations and the girls’ movement.

When I began this project, I had dreams of creating a critical ethnography detailing the complicated relationships and negotiations over representations of Black femininity between well-meaning Black women and the amazingly insightful and resilient Black girls they served. However, while retaining ethnographic methods, I modified my methodology to a qualitative case study. The shift did several things. First and foremost, while it did not remove concerns of representation, voice, and power, it correctly shifted the “subject” of study. Within a qualitative case study, one is interested in “a specific, unique, bounded system,” and the qualitative data, of which participant observation is only a part, serves to illustrate the case (Stake 1995, 274). As a result of careful consideration of the data gathered from the field, a qualitative case study seemed a better fit for the sociological questions I was pursuing and the better form for presenting the material. Thus I focused more on the events and exchanges within the organization to elucidate the configuration of power and constructions of femininity within GEP. This is

not to say that this case does not focus on the women's and girls' lives; it does. However, I do not purport to tell a story about Black women's and girls' lives at large; I only attempt to speak to their relationships within this organization and what that can tell us about women's and girls' construction and maintenance of safe spaces, their resistance to negative representations, and the impact of the organization on both of these processes.

As noted earlier, this shift does not eliminate questions of power and representation. I struggled with the tension between my shifting insider/outsider status and positions of power. Specifically, the more details I attempted to reveal about GEP women's and girls' lives, the more anxiety I experienced. That is, knowing how representations of Black women and girls are distorted and used to maintain social and power imbalances in this country, I began to feel uncomfortable displaying and publicly presenting the struggles of the girls and women to whom I had grown particularly close. I was also struggling with my own voice and experience. How was I going represent myself? How much of my life was going to be revealed? And how much voice would I give myself as the inside-out participant versus the outside-in observer? The more I contemplated these issues of representation and power, the more anxiety I felt. At times it was paralyzing. At other times I knew that challenging dominant discourses could shift the terrain. And if I could provide a mirror for myself and other women and girls in the girls' movement, then I knew I had an obligation to put pen to paper and write/represent the women and girls who courageously shared their voices with me, with the expectation that I would tell my story.

In the end, this is my informed sociological analysis of what I experienced, saw, heard, and felt during my time at GEP. As such, it is caught up in who I am. In many ways the research process and the text represent my own intellectual, educational, and political journey and tell the story of how my understanding has shifted during my ten-plus-year relationship with GEP. That said, I also believe it speaks to larger theoretical questions concerning identity, culture, and power.