

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

The Politics of “Being Too Fast”: Policing Urban Black Adolescent Female Bodies, Sexual Agency, Desire, and Academic Resilience

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3n68t1b2>

Author

Stevenson, Stephanie Y

Publication Date

2012-05-02

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

The Politics of “Being Too Fast”: Policing Urban Black Adolescent Female Bodies,
Sexual Citizenship, Desire, and Academic Resilience

Stephanie Stevenson

University of Maryland College Park

March 2012

Author Note

Stephanie Y. Stevenson, Department of American Studies, University of Maryland College Park

This paper is a revision of the original presented at the 2012 UCLA Thinking Gender Conference

*Please do not cite without the author’s permission

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Stephanie Y. Stevenson,
Department of American Studies, University of Maryland, 1102 Holzapfel Hall, College Park,
MD, 20742.

Contact: ssteven1@umd.edu

Abstract

Problem: The author asserts that culturally produced dominant representations and discourses mark low-income, urban black girls' bodies, thoughts, and actions as "fast" (i.e. sexually promiscuous). This punitive label enforces regulatory systems where the girls can be policed and reprimanded. **Methods:** The paper closely examines political narratives, policies, ethnographic data from focus groups with urban black Baltimorean middle school girls, and online coverage of a Baltimore City teen school sex scandal. **Theoretical Framework:** The author uses an intersectional analysis to highlight how urban black girls are often excluded from stigma-free sexual citizenship and bodily agency. **Implications:** The author suggests that national and local Baltimorean public policies have limited the girls' access to key resources such as health clinics, SBHC¹, and after school programs that focus on teen pregnancy and sexual development. This coupled with community stigma and silences surrounding romance, desire, and sex, may place the girls at higher risk to make unhealthy and un-pleasurable sexual decisions that negatively affect their positive social development. The author wonders if new media will provide new ways of speaking back to political narratives, structural inequalities, and public policies that aim to hinder black youth's access to sexual citizenship and bodily agency.

Keywords: urban black adolescent girls, "fast," Baltimore City, moral panics, sexual risk, desire, romance, pregnancy, urban schools, social media.

¹ Student based health clinics

“The Politics of Being Too Fast”: Policing Urban Black Adolescent Female Bodies,
Sexual Citizenship, Desire, and Academic Resilience

At an early age, cultural institutions such as: families, peers, schools, government agencies, and the media, bombard urban black girls² with contradictory images and messages. These ideas proscribe acceptable³ ways to publically and privately manage their bodies, romantic and sexual desires, and sexual activity. These cultural proscriptions usually manifest into demanding and regulatory systems where young black females’ bodies are politicized, monitored, and reprimanded in their personal communities and local/national public spheres. Unfortunately females and males across age, class, and residential location often become complicit in these acts towards other female peers; thus reinforcing the somatic, discursive, and psychic oppression of black females.

Carby (1992) locates the historical underpinnings of these raced, gendered, and classed systems of oppression and stigma as starting during the 1920s era of the Great Migration. She asserts that multi-faceted processes of urbanization, settlement, and class tensions between black American bourgeoisie of the North and working class and poor black female migrants of the South, led to urban black females’ bodies and actions being policed and marked as “social and

² The author uses the term “urban black female(s)” to denote the experiences of any urban black female across age groups. She uses the terms “urban black girls” and “urban black adolescent females” interchangeably to incorporate the experiences of urban black females from the ages of 0-17 years of age. This pushes for a comprehensive study of black feminism that strongly considers black girlhood and adolescence.

³ The author uses the term “acceptable” instead of “appropriate,” to show the structured, yet fluid nature of hegemonic norms and behaviors. This highlights that there is more room for individuals to resist their cultural and social norms if deviations they are understood to be tolerable.

political problem[s]” (Carby, 1992. p.739-740). Moral panics created dominant representations of urban black females as hypersexual, licentious, uneducated, and lazy. These labels largely identified new poor, urban black female settlers as threats to the facade of rigid black middle class respectability; and more importantly the entire race’s chances of gaining cultural, political, and economic citizenship.

As a result of these events, today “black sexual citizenship” (Faiman-Silva, 2004; Cahill, 2011) is still publically policed across class lines, but more stringently for low-income, urban black females, as their access to full rights and *equal* protections under the law is still understood as tenuous. Expanding upon Carby’s (1992) argument, I assert that today’s low-income, urban black girls’ and adolescent females’ bodies, thoughts, and actions are still understood through the lenses of moral panic, poverty, protection, and sexual risk. They are also policed by national and local political narratives, public policies, and individual interactions with peers, family, and public schools. In addition, I posit that low-income, urban girls’ social positions can disrupt traditional understandings of who *can* and *should* have access to sexual citizenship in the United States. This form of sexual citizenship will provide urban black girls with chances to critically analyze the concepts of risk, control, and success, while safely engaging in experiences with romance, desire, and sexuality

Method

Using an intersectional analysis of race, gender, sexuality, class, residential location, and age, I will highlight how structures of inequality and a renewed politics of respectability, restructured in this paper as the “politics of being too fast”⁴ still aims to exclude low-income,

⁴ The author loosely defines “the politics of being too fast” as a punitive discursive practice where individuals or groups label girls as “fast” (i.e. publically and privately sexually promiscuous) to publicly scrutinize their behavior in hopes of “protecting” the girls’: bodies,

urban black adolescent girls from participating in stigma-free bodily agency and sexual citizenship.⁵ First, I will discuss the theoretical frameworks that influence this study: Intersectionality, Black Feminist Sexual Scripts Theory, Bodily Agency, Black Sexual Citizenship and “The Politics of Being Too Fast.” Next, I will cover four major areas in this paper:

I. American Moral Panics Surrounding Black Womanhood & the Urban Black Girl

In this section I will provide examples of national moral panics that have marginalized, politically attacked, and regulated the lives and sexual citizenship statuses of black American females. I will explore this topic by examining national political narratives and public policies from slavery to the 1996 signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (better known as welfare reform).

II. “Why Be Less? When You Can Bmore?”: “The Politics of Being Too Fast” in Baltimore City

In this section I will examine how narratives of uplift, poverty, protection and risk operate in Baltimore City. Next I will analyze statistical reports concerning

sexual health, emotional/psychological safety, and chances of achieving academic and economic success, through stigmatization. The author attempts to theorize the use and importance of the colloquial phrase: “being fast” and/or “being too fast” in black urban and rural communities, through an analysis of the “the politics of being too fast.” This analysis hopes to challenge the way that today’s politics of black female (middle-class) respectability has policed the bodies, ideas, and actions of black females in America, denying them sexual citizenship. Although this form of cultural “protection” has good intentions, it does not foster healthy sexual development as it silences and polices public discussions and engagements with sexual decision- making, sexual desire, and sexual risk.

⁵ My definitions of the bodily agency and sexual citizenship can be found in the theoretical frameworks section of the paper.

Baltimorean black girls' low high school graduation rates and their rising rates of HIV/AIDS contractions and teen pregnancies in Baltimore. I then use the *Strategic Plan to Reduce Teen Births in Baltimore City* (Healthy Teen Network, 2010) to highlight how structural inequality operates in barring black adolescent girls and boys from full sexual citizenship. One example that I closely scrutinize is the lack of adolescent health and teen pregnancy prevention resources in Baltimore. I also question whether interpersonal silences and stigmatization around teen sex and the "politics of being too fast," contributes to the reported rises of academic and sexual health disparities among black girls in the city.

III. Participant Action Research: Listening to Urban Black Middle School Girls' Discussions of Culturally Acceptable Encounters with Romance, Relationships, and Sex in Southwest Baltimore

In this section, I will explore the demographic landscape of Southwest Baltimore City; the site of my participant-action research oriented ethnographic study. Then, I discuss the prevalence of issues such as: teen pregnancy, poverty, and education attainment in the area. Next, I will provide an analysis of the ethnographic data that I collected while conducting research with a cohort of 22 eighth grade black female public students in the area. This portion focuses on the ways that regulating interpersonal discourses rooted in the "politics of being too fast" policed the ways that the ethnographic study's participants publically discussed and engaged with romance, relationships, sex, and desire in their everyday lives. Some of the major themes found were:

- i.) Gendered Rules for Managing the Black Female Body
- ii.) “Not Needing a No Good Boy” & Maintaining Self Esteem
- iii.) Cultivating Strong Black Women “In-Training”: Managing Education, Desire, Control & Relationships
- iv.) Negotiating the Appropriateness of Teenage Sex
- v.) Losing Respect for “Fast,” “Grown,” And Bisexual/ “Gay” Girls,
- vii.) Breaking “Unspoken” and “Common Sense” Rules: Students Engaging in Public Sex

IV. “Indecent Exposure”: The Amber Cole Sex Scandal Reproduces Viral Stigma & Solidarity

Last, I will expand on the theme of public sex that was discussed in the ethnographic data, by analyzing the recent moral panic that erupted in Baltimore over two cases of black adolescent public sex in October 2011. I will primarily examine the local television news and online blogosphere coverage⁶ of Amber Cole, a 14 year-old, black female high school student who was recorded performing oral sex on male peers on school grounds, by cell phone video footage. First I will analyze how a freelance rap artist, Beatking’s song “Do It Like Middle School” became a stigmatizing anthem to represent Amber Cole and “fast” urban girls.” Next, I will analyze a video that a black teenage YouTube blogger named jordannmariebaby decided to create to forge solidarity with Cole.

⁶ Blogosphere: an online platform for individuals to document and share opinions and creative works on any topic within limited and extensive communities. This is an example of new (digital) media. (Other examples of new media can include: social media, digital applications for mobile devices, You Tube videos, etc.).

Theoretical Frameworks

Intersectionality

Dill and Zambrana's (2009) contribution to the black feminist theoretical framework of intersectionality provides an analytical tool to examine how social constructions of identity have shaped structures of inequality and privilege throughout time and space. This allows for a comprehensive study how groups' gain access to social, economic, and political resources and other social rewards and punishments. Examining the hegemonic domain of power (Dill and Zambrana, 2009, p.5), I will analyze how cultural ideologies, images, and representations of urban black girls' roles as citizens, can be inserted on personal, local, and structural levels. This allows the reader to understand the girls' possible roles as daughters, friends, potential lovers, students, workers, and potential mothers. Using an analysis of the interpersonal and disciplinary domains of power (p.5), is also crucial to examine how urban black girls' personal interactions with others, may shape the ideas and practices of local citizens that support bureaucratic policies which affect the girls' everyday lives and in turn their access to sexual citizenship (Hill Collins, 2000; Dill and Zambrana, 2009, p.5).

Black Feminist Sexual Scripts Theory

Stephens and Phillips' (2005) collaborative study highlights the importance of examining the intersections of race and gender as it relates to black adolescent females' sexual socialization. They consider how incorporating Black feminist thought into Simon & Gagnon's (1984,1986, 1987) frameworks of sexual script development can foster alternative understandings of black adolescent girls' sexual decision-making processes, experiences, and implications for their

sexual health (p. 50). Simon and Gagnon's theory of sexual scripts explains how sexual schemas are used in society to organize ideas of appropriate sexual experiences and "sites of sexual messaging," thus creating "norms regarding sexual behavior that are expressed and maintained through their usage" (2005, p. 41, 38).

Black feminist thought offers a framework to explain how black adolescent females' broadly shared sociopolitical experiences with marginalization and resistance, shape their development as sexual beings and impact their sexual (risk) decision-making processes (2005, p. 40). Interrogating these intersections will help us analyze how sexuality is imagined, expressed, performed, regulated, and resisted through "cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic"⁷ interpretations of what sexuality is or is supposed to be" (2005, p. 49).

Bodily Agency⁸

I describe bodily agency as a way to more freely express or silence oneself through various forms of communication such as: thought, speech, writing, movement, facial expressions, and gestures. This loose definition recognizes that individuals have ability to strategically choose which form of communication to engage in at certain places and times, and with certain people. This model allows for a deeper analysis of the ways that black girls' try to dis-identify with "fast" sexual identities as they do not want to be labeled as a threat to specific cultural understandings of respectability and age-appropriate engagement in discourses and acts

⁷ Intrapsychic refers to one's own self concept

⁸ This term was used by Dr. Sheri Parks (UMCP) in a discussion about this paper on March 28, 2012. She noted that black girls are not often provided with cultural narratives for "bodily agency" that are accepted in society. One example can be the ways that black girls are constantly characterized as angry and loud (Fordham, 1993). In this example the public tries to stigmatize and police black girls' forms of expression through the trope of the "angry black woman." I expanded upon the term more in this section more with my own thoughts.

of romantic and sexual desire. This strategic navigation of space and management of the body shows the limited room that the girls face when trying to access their own version of sexual citizenship.

Black Sexual Citizenship & The Politics of “Being too Fast”

Sexual citizenship is framed as a challenge to *who* can be understood as a legitimate participant in family and sexual intimacy that is outside of hetero-normativity and marriage (Faiman-Silva, 2004, p. 185). Often urban black girls’ discussions of romance, desire, and sexual intimacy are silenced in open and public spaces of their homes and schools, but is discussed and acted on in private spaces for fear of social exclusion and being publically seen and labeled as “fast.” The discursive practices of labeling girls “fast” is used to police black girls’ bodies, thoughts, and actions that may lead to public engagements in romantic and sexual encounters or pleasure inducing stimulants such as drugs or alcohol. Being labeled as “fast” is in no way limited to these activities, but it primarily concerns these somatic and psychic engagements with sex and desire. This punitive discursive practice aims to discipline urban black girls’ bodies and engagement with sexual knowledge and acts as a form of protection from the prophecies of past moral panics.

Although many black family structures and intimate relationships *do* often operate outside of traditional American, Christian, and hetero-normative rules, the “politics of being too fast” is rooted in the sexual cultural memory⁹ that black girls have represented through limited frames such as the “teen mom,” “the baby mama,” “the welfare queen,” and the “stupid hoe”. Often these stereotypes become embodied in the everyday lived experiences of urban black females. Not through a process of self-identifying with those hurtful terms, but through the tales

⁹ Refers to Cunninghams’s (2011) theorization of bodily memory in relation to culture and sex over time and space.

of struggle that the stereotype predicts. These stereotypical young women try to balance children, work, boyfriends (who may or may not be financially or emotionally supportive), school, and the everyday stresses of poverty. Parents and girls want to dis-identify with the historical and predictive power that the word “fast” inscribes on their bodies; as it is understood to hinder their positive social development.¹⁰ Black communities also recognize the material costs of being labeled fast and disavowed black sexual citizenship, as the state has a reputation of forcefully placing itself into every aspect of ones’ economic, familial, and sexual lives. This intrusive force particularly operates through public policies that foster the black feminization of poverty (Cahill, 2011, p. 191).

These analyses should enable us to examine how narratives of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” can apply to urban black adolescent girls’ access to knowledge about and engagement in romance, desire, and safe sexual activity. Building intimate and/or sexual relationships is a normal and crucial developmental task for adolescents. When this process is coupled with knowledge on how to foster sexual self-esteem and self-efficacy, all students can maintain safe-sex behaviors, attitudes, and decision making skills (Hunter, Guerrerro, Cohen, 2011, p.387). These frameworks will also allow me to question what can true sexual freedom be like for urban black female girls; and how can schools teach girls the intersections between bodily functions, sexual arousal, and safe ways to engage in intimate relationships with (hetero-sexual and/or homo-sexual partners).

¹⁰ Positive social development- development and maintenance of: high self-esteem & self-confidence; the ability to express one’s needs, desires, accomplishments, goals, challenges, and concerns; healthy friendships, social & romantic relationships; the ability to balance academic, social, and professional demands, etc.

Moral Panics

A “moral panic” is a societal state of frenzied being, where national, local, and/or group norms are disrupted by an “episode, person, or group of persons” that are identified as threats to one’s lived experience (Cohen, 1972, p.9). Describing the ephemeral threat of the Mods and the Rockers in British youth counter-cultures, Cohen examines how embodied group threats are marked, scripted, diagnosed, and policed by society’s moral leaders(1972, p. 9). He also notes that the public is given solutions to cope until their social worlds are restored (p. 9). In adapting Hall et. al.’s (1978) uses of Cohen’s work to describe fear over muggings in the United Kingdom, Carby (1992) asserts that moral panics, during the 1920s era Great Migration, marked poor and working class, southern black female migrants to the North, as vulnerable to and prone to sexually deviancy, laziness, and economic failure (p.739). She describes a moral panic as a “series of responses, from institutions and from individuals, that identified the behavior of these migrating women as a social and political problem, a problem that had to be rectified to restore the a moral social order” (Carby, 1992. p. 739-740).

Cathy Cohen (2010) discusses moral panics in the context of contemporary black sexual politics. She notes that hyper-sexualized and static representations of urban black adolescent females, such as the “baby mama,” “welfare queen,” and “video ho,” incite the levels of moral and political panic surrounding the sexual activities and sexual decision-making of black adolescent females. Cohen (2010) describes moral panics as media reports and rumors that highlight a threat to society’s “agreed-on respectable behavior and civilized ways of living” (p.36). She suggests that the black middle class’ moral panics and complicity in the secondary marginalization of the poor and working class, can explain why some black communities lead by older blacks may develop an exaggerated and limited understanding of black youth’s sexual

decision-making processes. In this process of media, political, and community condemnation, black female bodies are constructed as unworthy of equal citizenship status and are labeled as subversive (Cohen, 2010, p. 40).

Discussion

I. American Moral Panics Surrounding Black Womanhood & the Urban Black Girl

Black Women in the Context of Slavery

Historically local social institutions, such as families and urban public school communities have labeled their low-income, black adolescent female students' bodies as sites of potential sexual "crisis, risk and danger" that needed to be disciplined and tamed (Hunter, Guerrero & Cohen, 2011, p. 378). These labels take root in the globalized slave trade that identified labor, reproduction, and sexual objectification as black women's intrinsic value in antebellum American society. During the 19th century, global eugenics movements promoted black women's racial and sexual subordination, as blacks were represented as the "lowest on the hierarchy of humans in terms of intelligence, health, civility, and basic reasoning" (Stephens and Phillips, 2003, p. 6). This ideology inspired French scientists to display a caged South African woman, Sarah Bartmann (i.e. "Hottentot Venus"), to European audiences as a "sexual 'freak' of nature," because of her "'grossly overdeveloped labia,' and 'enlarged clitoris,' and large buttocks" (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 27; Byrd, 2004, p.11). These researchers declared that her "oversized" sexual organs and body parts proved that black women were subject to a "'primitive' sexual desire" (Byrd, 2004, p.11). Ferguson notes that the image of the Hottentot Venus was also used to link black women to prostitution and to juxtapose black female sexual promiscuity to white female chastity. Both British and American national imaginaries constructed black poor

and working-class women as vulnerable to engaging in deviant sexual practices and prostitution in urban centers (DuBois, 1996, p. 73; Carby, 1992, p.741; Ferguson, 2004, p. 9). These international discourses understood black poor and working-class women's "potential threat to gender stability and sexual normativity" and hetero-normative domesticity (Ferguson, 2004, pg. 9).

Urbanization & Politics of Respectability

Today's urban sexual politics were strongly cultivated within the elitist politics and practices of black middle class respectability that has historically aimed to regulate and "uplift" black females' sexual thoughts, bodies, and actions. Many black middle class women formed coalitions and social institutions to calm and control the rising "moral panic" that stemmed around urban black females bodies. Carby (1992) asserts that moral panics policed poor and working class, urban black female bodies and sexual activities through a "series of responses, from institutions and...individuals" that characterized them as "social and political problem[s]" (Carby, 1992. p. 739-740). The black middle class feared that poor, urban black females' immoral quest for pleasure and desire in urban slums, vice districts, and dancehalls (Carby, 1992, p. 745) would hinder blacks' ability to legitimately claim rights to first-class citizenship in America.

Attacks on "Matriarchy" & Motherhood: "The Welfare Queen" & "Teen Mom"

From the mid-twentieth century to the 1970s, low-income, urban black females continued to be marked as social and political problems as they faced all-out assaults on their individual and group reputations. Even more, constant media, political, and community condemnation continued to construct black females as unworthy of equal citizenship status in the United States (Cohen, 2010, p. 40). This was confirmed as their neighborhoods were restructured, destroyed,

and ghettoized under the rhetorical guise of “urban renewal” and infiltrated with the heavy sale of drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and crack. Unless their families had enough money to relocate to the outskirts of the city or suburbia, poor urban girls were left to be educated in underfunded public schools and often work as domestic workers or in service sector jobs.

In 1965, the Department of Labor and Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s called for national action to be taken to fix the “negro problem” and their “tangle with pathology” through the production of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, more widely known as *The Moynihan Report*. This bureaucratic document waged another culture and class war against the black female body. They were labeled as overbearing matriarchs that inhibited black men from excelling in society. Interestingly, he highlighted black women’s emerging power in macro and micro American social institutions in the report’s fourth chapter “The Tangle of Pathology” (Moynihan, 1965). He noted with a tinge of surprise and frustration that black women’s academic and economic success in the labor market (both service sector and blue collar) was close to that of all American females, and superseded that of black males (Moynihan, 1965). Although this emerging power was noted, it was stigmatized as a threat to black patriarchal family structures and American family values. In order to demote black women’s group status once again, he harkens on the ways that this broken family structure led to black women’s increased use of public welfare funds, which not only strained the American treasury but her own family. *Failed* black matriarchy is targeted as the primary reason that “most Negro youth [were] in *danger* of being caught up in the tangle of pathology that affects their world, and probably a majority [were] so entrapped” (Moynihan, 1965).

In the 1970s and 80s the conservative Reagan administration ran presidential campaigns on narratives that also constructed black women the cause of the black community’s and the

nation's economic and moral decline. Sears (2010) notes that these racist and misogynistic representations of black women as the "breeder women," "teen mom," and "welfare queen" emerged as conservative political regimes in the United States became wary of changing trends in the American political and sexual economy, and used teen pregnancy as a scapegoat (p.35). In the 1980s, federal bureaucratic assaults continued to police the nation's adolescent female bodies by promoting abstinence only "sex education" in public schools. U.S. Secretary of Education, William Bennett insisted that public schools only teach "'morality literacy' and... educate towards 'modesty,' 'chastity,' and 'abstinence' until marriage" (Fine, 1988, p. 32). Hegemonic narratives of urban black female hyper-sexuality and pathology were understood to be positioned in direct opposition to these governmental instructions and "normative assumptions of heterosexism and the nuclear family..." (Cohen, 2004, p.29). The black adolescent female body in particular was the domestic enemy of the state, as they were thought to threaten the productivity of the nation.

Regulating "Lazy" Black Females through the Lens of "Reform"

In 1996, President Bill Clinton, a democrat and a Republican congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (better known as welfare reform). This legislation continued the narrative that urban black females' poor work ethic, low-education, hypersexual tendencies, and high pregnancy rates were placing economic burden on the US. This policy also made the "causal relationship between the failure to marry and child poverty, as well as...child abuse, poor school performance, and juvenile crime" (Cahill, 2011, p. 191). In 1996, Tolman's "The Urban Girl," was published in a timely manner, as it spoke back to these limited narratives by highlighting the social, political, and economic consequences that

black girls face when marked through a lens of race, class, location, and sexual risk (p. 36).

Tolman states:

“she is not a real person but a unidimensional stick figure who lives in the public imagination rather than on the streets of urban America. On the body of The Urban Girl, social context becomes confused and confounded with race: she is a girl of color, and so she must be poor (Painter, 1992). She is the daughter of a single mother. She is incapable of delaying gratification, fails, in school, does not secure employment, and most of all she is sexually promiscuous, lacking in family values, and out of control. She is at risk and at fault. (1996, p. 255-256).

This description demonstrates the ways that stereotypical national imaginaries can blur the public’s ability to distinguish between real and complex female “black physical [bodies]” and feared monolithic female “black social [bodies]” (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 113). Black girls are framed as a political and social nightmare that America cannot wake up from.

II. “Why Be Less? When You Can Bmore?”: “The Politics of Being Too Fast” in Baltimore

Narratives of Uplift, Poverty, and Protection from Risk in Baltimore

Taking a closer look at the physical bodies, thoughts, and voices of urban black girls can provide information about the ways that they interpret national and local imaginaries of black girlhood, and if their sexual citizenship has been policed on interpersonal levels in their public schools, peer groups, and families. These groups often support the girls, but also replicate forms of oppression and stigmatization by labeling them as “fast.” This punitive discursive practice inscribes the girls’ bodies with sexual deviance and to “protect” their physical, socio-emotional safety and chances of achieving academic and economic success. Although this form of cultural *protection* has good intentions it hinders urban black girls from creating conscious negotiations of their desires, identities, capabilities, and ways to assert bodily agency and sexual citizenship.

As a native Baltimorean, I've always heard fellow urban black residents use the spatially and ontologically reflexive motto "Why Be Less, When You Can BMore?" BMore is *just* a colloquial reference to Baltimore City, Maryland, but when used by some individuals, the tone in which it's said suggests a pride in their hometown and in their own future dreams. This iteration of the phrase speaks back to national and local expectations for black Baltimoreans to be unproductive and deviant citizens. This motto has also been used to recognize that the city's residents do face a mix of structural inequalities and personal faults, but it takes the stance that there's always room to "improve." It calls for marginalized residents to *be more* and *do more* with their lives. The phrase resonates with classist narratives of racial uplift and empowerment that have been repeated in the black community since the abolition of slavery, for better and for worst. Following and adapting traditional models of black middle class respectability, today urban school officials and parents often use discourses that call for low-income, urban black girls to empower themselves through academic success, limited social and romantic involvement with peers, and abstinence.

Education, HIV/AIDS, & Black Teen Pregnancy Disparities in Baltimore

Education has often been viewed as a path to empowerment, as low rates of high school graduations can ultimately hinder black girls from achieving sustainable economic success. In 2010, the *Baltimore Sun* noted that only 66% of Baltimore City's high-school residents graduated, compared to 86.5% of high-school graduations in the state of Maryland (Bowie, 2010). The number of black female Baltimore City high-school graduates did see recent improvements, as it rose from 67% in 2007 to 74% in 2010. Although these statistics are improving over time, it still shows the structures of inequality that black Baltimorean youth face;

as in 2007 they compromised 70% of the 15-19 year old Baltimore City teen demographic (Healthy Teen Network, 2010, p. 11).

There is a large body of literature that finds *direct* correlations between “making better grades in school and having higher educational aspirations” and “the postponement of sexual intercourse,” (Tucker-Halpern et al., 2000, p.14). In addition to looking at the ways in that culture may shape knowledge or academic achievement, we must consider the social and environmental factors that low-income black female students face. They have a greater chance of attending urban schools that are underfunded, overcrowded, and lacking academic, faculty, and social resources to fully support every student’s educational and social-emotional needs. Even with urban education reforms children are still often *Left Behind* in American public schools, no matter how motivated they are to succeed.

These disparities invoke fears that distractions from academics will place the girls at risk for negative outcomes. Some of these may include: academic failure, lowered social reputation, emotional scaring, sexual harassment, sexual coercion, sexual abuse, rape, pregnancy, and/or STD and HIV/AIDS contractions. Urban black sexual politics asserts that “being fast” and succeeding in school do not mix, and are a recipe for disaster. This dialectic was formed in response to the creation of dominant discourses that associate urban black girls’ academic and economic failure with a preoccupation with materialism and outer beauty, early and increased sexual activity, and therefore an increased likelihood of becoming a teenage mother.

Urban Black Sexual Politics: Stigma & Silences Contributing to Rise in HIV/Pregnancy?

In Baltimore and many other East Coast black communities, the phrase “being fast” is analogous to a black girl “growing up too fast,” but highlights her desire to engage in

heterosexual and intimate interactions with boys. In *some* instances it can refer to a girl's wholesale interest in and/or engagement with "adult activities" such as alcohol/drug use, flirting, and dating, becoming pregnant, and raising a child. The term's use in black urban and rural culture has always primarily referred to black female promiscuity and deviancy from culturally specific norms of black female respectability. This term is *never* used to stigmatize sexually promiscuous males. This linguistic double-standard affects the everyday realities of black girls as it punishes those who are labeled "fast," as it silences conversations about safety, love, romance, and desire, in hopes of controlling sexual behavior.

This discursive policing of urban black female bodies contributes to the "material and ideological oppression" of black adolescent females through the politics of disempowerment (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 5). Quite possibly the veil of silence over romantic and sexual desire has negatively contributed to the high number of HIV/AIDS contractions among black females and high rates of teen pregnancy in Baltimore City. Local governmental, familial, and personal concerns about black adolescent female Baltimoreans' health and social welfare are constantly marked by discourses of risk, regulation, and the need for protection, but few focus on emotion and desire in positive ways. In March 2012, the John Hopkins School of Medicine found that urban black female Baltimoreans' are increasingly falling victim to HIV at rates five times higher than expected by the CDC (Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 2012). On September 17, 2010, several Baltimore agencies collaborated to publish a *Strategic Plan to Reduce Teen Births in Baltimore City*. The study found that Baltimore's general teen birth rate was 66.4 births/ 1000 females ages 15-19 in 2007, which was higher than the national birth rate average of 42.5 births/1000 teen mothers during that time (Healthy Teen Network, 2010, p.10).

The Guttmacher Institute¹¹ reported that, in 2008, U.S. teen pregnancy rates dropped by 29% since 1990, from a national peak of 117 births /1,000 teens who became pregnant, to 67.8/1000 (Healthy Teen Network, 2012). Unfortunately only a year before, in 2007, the black teen pregnancy rate in Baltimore City was still 80.2 births/1000 teens (Healthy Teen Network, 2012, p.10). Comparing these national statistics to predominately black local urban statistics, conveys how even in the 21st century, urban black girls' access to sexual citizenship is thwarted by a lack of state investment in her health and well-being.

The Lack of Adolescent Health and Teen Pregnancy Prevention Resources in Baltimore City as Reported in the *Strategic Plan to Reduce Teen Births in Baltimore City*

The Healthy Teen Network's (2010) study interviewed 40 diverse Baltimorean youth participants between the ages of 13-19, between 2009 and 2010 (the sample was predominately black). Most youth in the study reported early engagement in sexual intercourse (girls average 13-14 years and boys average 10-12 years, between 44%-100% had sex depending on the focus group), a high use of condoms when participating in sex acts, and four participants were teen mothers; one a teen father, and one pregnant (Healthy Teens, 2010, p. 32). When asked "what's missing for youth in their communities that would help them wait to have sex?" their responses ranged from: "someone to talk to that you can trust, to support groups, to free condoms, to sex education" (p. 32).

The study noted that there limited programs that focused on adolescent reproductive health care services for males and females "including contraception, counseling about safer sex practices, and assessment for STI, HIV, and pregnancy" (p. 22). The study found that Baltimore

¹¹Guttmacher Study: Kost & Henshaw (2012) is cited in the references section

City only had five clinics, 15 school-based health centers (SBHC), and no evidence-based or proven effective sexuality education curricula/ programs that were offered by Baltimore City Public School System (but some programs planned to use evidence based programs at health clinics to train teachers at various schools the future) (Healthy Teen Network, 2010, p. 22, 24-25). There were two school-based teen pregnancy prevention programs in Baltimore: KIPP Ujima Village Academy (KIPP) (which was scheduled to close at the end of the 2009-2010 school year “due to time and resource constraints”) and the Carrera program at the Paquin Middle/Secondary School for Expectant and Parenting Adolescents (Paquin School) (p. 25). The study did not find any available faith-based programs, but they found one residential program for teen pregnancy prevention: the Florence Crittenton Services (p. 26). There was one community-based program specifically related to teen pregnancy prevention: The Butterfly Program at The Jewel House (p.26). The study noted that although Baltimore City has 65 after-school programs, (primarily funded through the Family League of Baltimore, and supported by The After-School Institute (TASI)) there are none related to teen health or pregnancy prevention (p.27).

Examining this data in relation to the lack of adolescent health and teen pregnancy prevention programs in Baltimore City, we can assert that the city’s youth have a very limited amount of official spaces to seek out help, advice, mentorship, or solidarity when discussing issues related to healthy sexual development. Hunter, Guerrero & Cohen (2011) state that healthy sexual development encompasses “development of sexual self-esteem and self-efficacy to foster safe-sex behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making both in adolescence and throughout the life course” (p.388). If urban black youth do not have access to key structural resources such as health clinics, SBHC, or after school programs that focus on teen pregnancy and sexual development, they may be stuck to make poor sexual decisions that negatively affect their health.

This is especially important because of the punitive practice of labeling girls “fast”. If girls fear being labeled as “fast” or the social consequences of her sexual desires or activities being exposed she may hesitate to discuss her experience with parents, teachers, school nurses, or friends. This may lead to her entry into very dangerous, unhealthy, and un-pleasurable terrains. We can observe how structural inequalities such as poverty and the lack of access to teen health clinics, affordable health-care, birth-control, in-school sex-education classes, and community support systems may greatly contribute to the disproportionately high rates of teen births among black girls in Baltimore, and all American teen girls in the nations.

These statistics show that HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, and graduation rates are very serious issues in Baltimore for black youth and particularly black adolescent girls. More importantly, this leads us to recognize that although sexual risk is an important issue for the girls’ it is more helpful to understand the ways that structural inequalities limit the girls’ access to the keys to sexual citizenship: knowledge, resources, and the power of expression.

III. Participant Action Research: Listening to Urban Black Middle School Girls’

Discussions of Cultural Acceptable Encounters with Romance, Relationships, and Sex

In order to learn more about these issues, I am currently leading the second of a three-year, IRB approved longitudinal study and in-school intervention program that has collectively worked with approximately 51 economically disadvantaged black adolescent girls at a Southwest Baltimore City public school to-date. Using a model of participant-action research (PAR), the girls and I have attempted to critically analyze their and my own experiences with poverty, urban schooling, and the “politics of being too fast” in Baltimore City. Although, this paper discusses the need for sexual citizenship and bodily agency, I do not solely label this ethnographic study as

a study of urban black girls' sexual activity. This is a study of the strategies that the girls use, in the context of their schools and communities, to express their public and private identities, form and maintain peer, romantic, sexual, and familial relationships, and navigate adversity.

This paper focuses on what I have dubbed the “politics of being too fast,” to recognize the symbolic and real role that the stigmatizing discursive system plays in black girls' everyday lives. The label of “fast” not only attacks a girls' socially understood legitimacy as a “respectable” girl, but its assumptions belittle her potential as a productive, agentive, and happy member of our global society. We must recognize that happiness and success can happen with/without a baby, a wedding ring, a same sex-loving partner, or HIV/AIDS. This statement recognizes the complexity and great hardships that can come along with each of those social locations, but it calls for scholars and everyday citizens to look for the nuances within individual/group situations. This study hopes to expand possibilities for discussing the “missing discourse of desire” (Fine, 1988) in urban and national public arenas and particularly within the girls' school; as it is one of the major sites where youth learn academics, but also how to navigate hierarchal peer, romantic, and sexual relationships.

Although my research project/intervention program is not evidence-based, I do offer a space for my participants to talk about the “missing discourse of desire” (Fine, 1988) within the rigid space of the public school. When studying black and Latina high school students in the Bronx, New York she recognized that although a discourse of desire, was missing in the “‘official’ [school] curriculum, it [was] by no means missing from the lived experiences or commentaries of young women” (p. 35). This is important as Fine (1988) notes that “public schools have historically been the site for identifying, civilizing, and containing that which is considered uncontrollable” (p.31). This has been especially true in predominately black urban

schools, that are often given the charge to regulate urban black females' before they become *too much* of a social, political, and economic burden to the nation-state (p. 31). Black girls surrounding the site of my program in Southwest Baltimore, most likely have been understood to be a part of the city and nation's burden; as it was identified as having highest occurrences of teen pregnancy in addition to North East Baltimore, two of the most impoverished areas of the city (Healthy Teen Network, 2010, p. 11).

Southwest Baltimore: Demographics of Teen Pregnancy, Poverty, & Education Attainment

The Baltimore City Health Department's Office of Policy and Planning cites census data, from 2005-2009, that shows that Southwest Baltimore is: 76.2% black, the highest percentage of the population is between 0-17 years old, 51.4% are women, and more than 45.3% of residents make below \$25, 000 in Southwest Baltimore (Ames et al., 2011). These statistics show that teen pregnancy, poverty, and education attainment are very serious issues in this community, but more importantly it leads us to consider what other issues black girls may face such as: high STD contraction rates, high number of sexual partners, lack of control in relationships, and limited health, academic, and family support systems.

Their Voices, My Interpretation: Working Together to Describe "The Politics of Being Too Fast"

After analyzing ethnographic data from three workshop sessions on sex and romance in the fall of 2010, I recognized that the cohort of 22 eighth grade girls collectively described a sense of frustration with the process of negotiating how to appropriately navigate performances of black femininity and sexuality at school. Unfortunately, I noticed that my participants constantly labeled girls who rebelled against the slippery slope of these culturally accepted forms

of respectability and success, as “fast.” They *always* strategically dis-identifying with this social category. My ethnographic research agrees Weekes’ (2002)¹² argument that “through engaging in complex processes of denigrating the sexual activity of their peers, young Black women attempt to portray themselves as sexually respectable...and become entangled in the tensions created by such positions within the school-based discourses of heterosexism” (2002, p. 25).

Gendered Rules for Managing the Black Female Body

Narratives of “being fast,” should consider the ways in which girls receive dominant heterosexual narratives of appropriate ways to publically expose and clothe one’s body. The way that a girl clothes or exposes her body in the urban public school, is important as her body is constantly monitored, objectified, and compartmentalized by teachers, administrators, and male and female peer’s gazes (Pillow, 2000). Society’s hypersexual representations of black girls’ body parts have made black girls with more noticeably developing butts, breasts, and curves become easy targets to be scrutinized by (adults and children alike). The “thick” girl¹³ is always assumed to be sexual available, “fast,” and have a higher chance of engaging in early sexual activities, no matter how false this may be. Because the black female body is such a politicized space, young girls are taught to cover their bodies as much as possible to stop “negative” attention in their tracks. Many urban schools have instituted uniforms to solve this problem, as well as the issue of affordability. Although some uniform dress codes are very restrictive, others allow the girls to wear certain jewelry accessories to fit in with popular trends. Tennis shoes

¹²Week’s (2002) study examines young black Afro-Caribbean women in the U.K. Examining this story through intersectional and black diasporic lenses, we can see how understandings of black female respectability have traversed geographical borders, as both American and English, Afro-Caribbean black females have faced similar experiences with slavery, colonization, and post slavery/colonization civil rights and black power movements to end racism and sexism.

¹³ Thick is a colloquial term that signifies a black girls’ sexually appealing pubescent body. (i.e. She is voluptuous.)

also often provide another cultural outlet for the girls to express their gendered identity while in school, as shoes with excessively feminine/adult connotations such as high heels and platforms are outlawed as they are seen as too sexualized.

When girls wear dresses and skirts or pants, they are always told to “close her legs,” and to “sit like a lady,” in order to not signal attention to their genital areas. If a girl doesn’t close her legs or constantly sits with her legs “spread open” in class, she will be looked down upon as undisciplined, sexually promiscuous, and “fast.” Through this bodily position she is viewed as breaking an unsigned coded of respectability. This example of policing of black female body occurs while male students sit down on classroom chairs with their legs gaped wide open, sometimes with a width span of almost 3 feet or more. He is almost never told to “sit like a gentleman,” and if he is usually not publically chastised for his bodily position. When a girl sits in an “un-lady like” position with her legs agape, she understood to be inviting prospective sexual gazes and by default sexual intercourse; while male bodies are seen as normal, and not threatened. As a result they are allowed to manage their bodies more freely. These gendered double standards exhibit the complexity of managing the black female body in public spaces of in the school.

“Not Needing a No Good Boy” & Maintaining Self Esteem

After meeting with the girls during the past three focus group sessions I recognized common themes surrounding their discussions of “being too fast.” By observing the girls’ words, tones, gestures, and interactions with one another, I concluded that the girls highly disliked “fast” girls that exhibited “adult activities” in public. Early on in the discussion they separated themselves from being identified as “fast.” The consensus among the girls was that “fast” girls lacked high self-esteem, and usually because they were not getting enough attention at home or

from boys in school. They felt that girls that are “obsessed” with boys will do anything to get their attention. They noted that this need for personal/ visual attention can start at an early age. One participant cited her six year old cousin who loves to be noticed by her sister’s boyfriend and receive compliments on her clothes. My research participant’s labeling of a six year old as “fast,” is telling as it shows how even pre-pubescent black adolescent girls’ bodies and actions are inscribed by sexual deviancy.

The girls also expressed a belief that “boys only want one thing...sex,” so they would not waste their time or energy on boys that will only get in the way of their success. In addition, they did not want to sacrifice their reputation in their peer networks for “no good boys.” My research participants discursively paint themselves as “strong black women” who do not need attention to be satisfied. Although this discourse bids well for the girls’ academic success, it still leaves the girls with little room to follow their romantic desires. I wondered how the girls *really* negotiated policing their own bodies and making decisions about when to fall in love or date boys.

Cultivating Strong Black Women “In-Training”: Managing Education, Desire, Control In Relationships

Low-income, urban black girls are taught that they must learn how to “make it” through the struggles of everyday life in order to survive. Parks’ (2010) work highlights how everyday black girls and women negotiate the costs of happiness and suffering in order to survive. Her text exposes a problematic pattern, where black females of all ages often embody the discourse of the “Strong Black Woman” to an inhuman extent, by trying to juggle her own struggles and those of her family and community. She often works toward other’s happiness and not her own. Although this trait often emerges as a result of black communities’ reliance and respect for females who serve as “other-mothers” (Collins), what’s at stake when black girls and adolescents apply this

behavior to their intimate relationships? In particular what's at stake when black girls put their partner's sexual desires before their own, and risk their health and safety? Here we can consider how factors such as sexual coercion, unequal power, and control in may operate in teen relationships, even for girls who have been taught to be "strong" and powerful.

In addition to social support, Rosenthal and Lewis (1996) and Cohen (2010) discuss how adolescents' sense of power and control in their relationships are central to healthier sexual decision making, (p.732; p.61). In my study one girl who started to talk about her sexual experiences, discussed how she often went to her boyfriend's house or he came to her's; but anytime they were alone he would playfully push her head toward his lap. Cohen's study found that Black youth were "less likely to report engaging in oral sex and sexual intercourse" (Cohen, 2010, p. 55). Because she did not overtly say what he wanted, I as well as others in the group most likely read this behavior as him signaling that he wanted the participant to give him fellatio or as the girls' called it a "blow job." Although her classmates and I tried to respectfully ask her what happened in these situations, she mumbled and provided us with a vague silence that hinted to me that she unwillingly felt dedicated to perform oral sex to make him happy. In another instance the girl hinted at the fact that her boyfriend did not want anything to do with her while she was on her period. He would not even let her sit on his lap. She vaguely described feelings of hurt and dismissal. This is an unfortunate example of moments when girls may feel as though they have a lack of control in their relationships, and may be forced to do things that they do not want to do.

Rosenthal and Lewis (1996) frame urban adolescent females' understandings of power and control as: pressure to engage in sex because of their own or their partner's behavior, and/or having a lack of knowledge about safe and mutually satisfying sex practice (p.733-734). In order

for young black women to be strong in every aspect of her life, she must be taught how to safely and enjoyably experience some level of romance and desire. Schaffer et al. (2007) note that adolescents' engagement and maintenance of healthy, intimate romantic relationships is an important developmental task (p. 55), and more parents and schools should provide safe spaces to discuss these issues.

The strong black woman "in training" often learns to negotiate the economic benefits of academic achievement and the physical and emotional costs of delaying engagement in sexual pleasure. She constantly receives the reoccurring hetero-normative message that sex and school do not mix, because of the possibility of sexual risks; where "healthy sexuality is often positioned as no sexuality" (Tolman, 2001, p. 203). This discourse shapes the girls' everyday engagements with possible romantic interests at school and in their communities. Burns and Torre's (2005) study focuses on the ways that sexual desire is a distraction to girls achieving academic success. Tolman's (1994, 1996) studies highlight the ways that urban girls who experience violence, have a hard time experiencing desire.

Hunter, Guerrero, and Cohen (2011) note how engaging in the politics of desire can be a luxury and/or a nightmare for some low-income urban black and Latina girls (p. 390). This analysis shows us how having limited access to safe and satisfying sexual desire, and therefore sexual citizenship, places marginalized girls in emotionally frustrating and dangerous positions, where she often has to choose between education and livelihood and socio-emotional fulfillment, all a part of human's basic needs. Tolman (2002) argues that girls solve this issue, either by distancing themselves sexual situations or creating safe spaces for experiencing sexual desire (Hunter, Guerrero, and Cohen, 2011, p. 396). Strong black women in-training often have to learn ways to find safe spaces and cope with many risks that they face, on their own. It's

important that finding safe spaces to experience desire be considered as it provides outlets for the girls to make healthy decisions about desire and sexual activity.

Negotiating the Appropriateness of Teenage Sex

One of the most important and relevant questions was raised by a new girl to the program. She asked her classmates (not directly me), “Do you think it’s okay to have sex when you are around 13? Even, if you are protected?” The girls collectively yelled “NO!!!” Directly after this collective response, individuals began side conversations with each other about the topic, as if they were shocked that she asked it. I was personally proud of my research participant, for engaging the group with such a thoughtful question. One girl adamantly wanted to respond to the question. She believed that “only fast girls have sex at thirteen”...she alluded to the immorality of the act by referencing the (Christian) bible, and church, and said that the “right time for sex is marriage”. My research participant was very passionate about her religious beliefs and how they influenced her understanding of respectability.

Fine asserts that adolescent girls’ sense of sexuality is always “informed by peers, culture, religion, violence, history, passion, authority, rebellion, body, past and future, and gender and racial relations of power (Espin, 1984; Omolade, 1983)” (1988, p.35). Hunter, Guererro, and Cohen (2011) echoed this notion, by noting that how social institutions such as the school and the church may greatly influence urban black girls’ conceptions of appropriate types of engagements with romance, desire, and sex. If girls do want to explore these new pleasurable but possibly dangerous terrains, being “faced with disapproving adults and community institutions such as many churches, adolescents may refrain from seeking protection, contraception, or STD testing in order to hide their sexual activity (Halfner, 1998).

Losing Respect for “Fast,” “Grown,” And Bisexual/ “Gay” Girls

Another reoccurring theme that emerged in our conversations discussed how the girls lost respect for old friends that “became fast,” when they grew old enough to understand the “politics of being too fast.” Two research participants told stories in reference to this theme:

I know this girl who sneaks boys through her window at night...(Laughs)...she's 16, and she said that she lost her virginity at 12...and she just (ewww-from the group)...and she hides boys in her closet, (a few girls laugh) and she knows her mother's work schedule and that's even worst (tone becomes more serious)..she has all types of people in her house and I don't even like going around her no more...I told her she was too fast and needs to stop sneaking boys in her house...she told me, I don't care what anyone thinks!- 1st research participant

I know this girl ...who's 17 or 18 and got pregnant twice...she was my role model...but now she goes both ways (referring the girl's bisexuality)...and taking E pills (Ecstasy) like a big old dummy!.-2nd research participant

The girls describe these “fast girls” stories’ as hitting them close to home. Their interpersonal interactions with the girls, before they “became fast,” allowed them to judge the girls less harshly as they would a stranger. These stories did not recount just “another sad story” about a “misdirected” black girl, they were personal. It outlined how they personally chose to stay on the “right path” whereas others choose to “be grown” (i.e. too grown up). “Being too grown” is analogous to “being too fast,” and both connote a girl’s engagement in sexual activities. The second discussion showed how the girls’ perceptions of her role model changed, when she learned about a girl’s “fast” nature or her even her possibly more deviant self-identification as bisexual or lesbian. There is usually little room in black urban culture’s dominant dialogue for

bodies that are marked with different sexualities, especially among predominately heterosexual youth.

One research participant made a comment after observing the recent suicides of LGBTQ teens and her experiences with female friends outside of school self-identifying as a lesbian that “it seems like everyone is turning gay.” She shook her head with confusion as she said this. I asked the girls whether they would end a friendship with a previous friend after their friend “came out;” most girls said that it depended on the situation. I asked them why. They noted that they would primarily be skeptical about the friendship, because they did not want a girl to hit on them. Cohen’s research identifies black youth as “signaling at best a position of limited tolerance” for homosexuality (2010, p. 70). The girls’ fear of being hit on shows the common misconception that lesbianism or homosexuality is a threat to a heterosexual’s personal space, body, sexuality, and peer networks. This also shows another way that one marginalized group can participate in the subjugation of others through the spread of stigma, confusion, and hate.

Cohen identifies this phenomenon the “practice of self-policing in black communities” that leads to the “secondary marginalization of those who are most vulnerable in oppressed communities...” (Cohen, 2010, p. 27-28). Cohen’s argument directly refers to elite blacks in marginalized communities, but I posit that this form of “secondary marginalization” extends even beyond residents’ socio-economic class differences, but also gender, and sexuality differences. Scholars must also recognize that secondary marginalization requires understandings of the ways in which individuals negotiate identity in relation to the culturally constructed narratives of normalcy and respectability, which are unstable, fluid, and complex.

Breaking “Unspoken” and “Common Sense” Rules: Students Engaging in Public Sex

In other conversations many girls highlighted the ultimate performance that proved a girl’s “fastness;” having sex and/or intimate physical relations in public spaces. Many girls shared stories about instances of middle school aged boys and girls kissing, having sex, and having oral sex in school bathrooms and locker rooms, movie theaters, and department store fitting rooms. Many of the girls were shocked, or acted shocked to hear these stories and showed signs of being uncomfortable (i.e. laughing loudly and/or constantly giggling when they were told).

In each case of school public sex and “PDAs” (public displays of affection) middle school students were caught by school officials and/or faculty members. Although, the girls laughed about these stories they all shook their heads, and commented on how “bad” and “stupid” these students were for breaking “unspoken” school rules and getting caught.

It is important to highlight that the politics of “being too fast” is very much predicated upon what sexual activities can be seen and which can be hidden. The girls seemed to chastise their female peers’ public displays of affection and sexual activity, more than private actions. Discussions around romance and love are often policed and shaped differently than sex, as they are seen as more acceptable to speak about. Nonetheless, Banister and Leadbeater (2007) highlight how “social norms privatize intimacy” and “create walls of silence around what it means to love and be loved” and this may influence the ways in which the girls feel comfortable publically expressing their romantic and sexual desires (p. 121).

During a meeting I coordinated an activity where the girls disclosed that many of them were “in love” with a boy at some point in time, interacted and flirted with boys in their neighborhood and school, kissed or were kissed by a boy, or entered a boy’s home. I had the girls create a large circle by standing up, and every time I read one of the aforementioned

prompts, the girls would collectively enter the circle if they related to the experience that I read. I had the girls engage in this activity, because only one girl previously shared her sexual experiences. Once the girls entered the circle a few times, they began to feel comfortable talking. Through analyzing the girls' short confessions of intimate emotional and/or physical experiences with boys, it is clear that they police other girls' bodies in public and private spaces, but only thoroughly police their own bodies in public spaces. The girls' smiles and upbeat tones revealed a sense of relief that they could share and hear their classmates' similar experiences with boys and relationships. This was the one safe space, where the girls partially let down their guard, and refrained from calling each other's behavior's fast. The girls clearly do not always follow the strict rules of respectability when they themselves are in private. This relates to Becker's analysis of the impact of public knowledge on deviant subjects bodies and future actions (Becker, 1973, p. 30). The girls do not fear public censure when no one is watching, but they do not want to be "branded as deviant" because their "everyday routines" will be denied (Becker, 1973, p.30-31).

In some ways, the girls' narratives of disappointment in and censure of peers who were "too fast" were more concerned with the "fast" girls' breaking of social norms and unspoken rules *in public* that were supposed to be intelligible to all in their community. Cohen notes that black youth internalize cultural narratives of appropriate behavior and "reiterate it when asked to judge behavior" (p.53). This hypocrisy demonstrates the tension between black adolescent girls' understanding of culturally accepted gender norms. This may stem from a long history of black communities hiding and silencing sexual discourses that were not viewed as acceptable. Cohen notes that black institutions such as public schools, only perpetuate this silencing as they do not provide black youth with ways to openly discuss sex and sexuality outside of legislated discourses of abstinence and sex education (2010, p.53).

“Indecent Exposure”: The Amber Cole Sex Scandal Reproduces Viral Stigma & Solidarity

In October 2011, Baltimore City and Baltimore County schools and communities were confronted with moral panics that ignited over two incidents where black adolescent youth engaged in sexual activities on school property. The local news media characterized the stories with the headline “Indecent exposure. Videos of Baltimore students having sex spreading worldwide” (WJZ CBS Local Media b, 2011). Please watch here:

<http://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2011/10/21/video-of-school-students-having-sex-goes-viral-online/>

In the primary case, a 14 year old girl named Amber Cole made headlines online but the local news never revealed her name. This young Baltimorean was video recorded on a cell phone having oral sex at an off-site school building that belonged to Frederick Douglass High School, one of the city’s most low-achieving public schools (DeMennato, 2011). Although, the camera angle suggests that Cole was not aware that she was being recorded, the public had no mercy. This cell phone video threw Cole’s seemingly private sexual actions into the unforgiving domestic, international, and online public spheres. This incident was able to spark large flames because it reminded the public of past moral panics over black youth sexuality, and the political rhetoric of the Reagan, Clinton, and Bush administrations that scared the nation with narratives of the hypersexual, urban black girl. The video not only exposed the already dormant public secret that hid the existence of private youth sex cultures, but told the world that sexual desire and sexual activity did indeed occur in the highly regulated space of the public school.

Even after the graphic video was removed from the internet, other remnants of public memory emerged. The blogosphere was buzzing with everyday teens and adults creating videos and written accounts of their feelings about the story, and even op-eds were written on popular news websites like the Huffington Post and the Grio. In many instances Cole was often

characterized as a pathological “whore,” “bitch,” “slut,” and “heifer” that needed proper discipline, and home-training and blamed her dad; while others defended her actions by stating that the only reason that she was being chastised publically, was because she was caught. Some individuals problematized the role of the males that recorded and posted the video. There were even speculations the boys would be arrested on child pornography charges. Nonetheless, Amber Cole has been forever labeled as “fast” in the eyes of the reprimanding public. Dances, songs, and jokes have been made about her actions, and only serve to humiliate her and other “fast” girls like her. For those of us who never saw the sex tape, we have no visual public record of what she looks like, but we do have her name, the power to conduct a Google Search, and a referent to the silhouette of a faceless urban black female body.

A freelance rapper named Beatking wrote, recorded, and posted a song named “Do It Like Middle School,” that was more infamously dubbed the “Amber Cole Freestyle 2011.” (Please listen with caution here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDMLZyWBMB>. (LJBOfficial1, 2011). Just like the Amber Cole video footage, his song went viral and people are still listening to it. Although Amber Cole is a freshman in high school, Beatking decided to name the song “Do It Like Middle School,” most likely because most some students are still in the eighth grade when they are 14 years old, which hints at how young she is.

Beatking’s song tells the tale of a 14 year old boy, who is a self-proclaimed pimp, who loves to go to school not only for the academic rigor of taking tests, but because he is always rewarded afterwards by the presence of “fast” girls like Amber Cole who are willing to “suck his balls” and let him “fuck [her] in the back.” He’s able to participate in all of these pleasurable and normalized behaviors before he goes home to enjoy the popular cartoon Dragon Ball Z (LJBOfficial1, 2011). He discusses the great distraction that “fast” black girls serve as, as he

“cannot go to class when there’s hoes in the hall” which he repeats 3 times in the chorus of the song (LJBOfficial1, 2011). This video highlights how black girls’ bodies are viewed at the site of the public school, by male and female peers, and undoubtedly school officials. Now that the Amber Cole case has been inserted into public memory, black girls’ bodies may be seen as an even greater threat to the normalcy of the public school’s academic learning and social environment.

As black girls are constantly blamed by their schools and male peers for being “moral distractions” (Pillow, 2000, p. 202), black male teens are allowed to be held without equivalent blame. The public imagination expects that “boys will be boys,” but only “fast” girls will publically or privately expose her sexual desire. When her public desire does enter the public sphere her body and actions are stigmatized and policed, and all other black females’ sexual citizenship (across age and class) is affected by this representation. If some black females and males take a minute to not reprimand the target of public abhorrence, and completely dis-identify with her private and now public actions, they might understand her search for sexual pleasure, and possibly love, through her sexual act. Then they might feel her pain from the stigma and public exposure of such a private moment, and might be able to forge solidarity.

One blogger, jordannmariebaby, a black female teenager, posted a YouTube Video on October 17, 2011 where she strongly defended Amber Cole’s actions and almost 2.5 million people have viewed it. In the video she stated that she was on #team Amber Cole and #team AC. This recognition of being on a “#team___” has been a popular trend on Twitter and other social media sites such as Facebook. Here the hashtag (#) signifies that the next phrase will become a trending topic and the word “team” followed by an object of interest ” ____”, allows individuals to claim their solidarity with a movement, ideas, people, or topics that they believe in. This

blogger cried, showed anger, and disgust with members of the national blogosphere that stigmatized Amber Cole's body, reputation, and sexual actions. jordannmariebaby highlighted the fact that the blogosphere was "talking about this girl like she did a crime or something..."; she stated with anger and bulging eyes "Y'all need to STOP... Leave Amber Cole Alone... she got a heart... she's a real person" (2011).

Although, many individuals on the blogosphere are still talking about this incident and wrote:

"Who gives a fuck if she is 11,12,13,14 . She at school sucking Dick instead of being in class so she old enough to know what she was doing. Nobody forced her to skip class go outside the school &' get on her knees. Right ? So chill , get out yall damn feelings."

-You Tube Comment by [ebonylashawn93](#) —posted 1 month ago

"Blast tha bitch thats what she get"
You Tube Comment by [idezzieE](#) -5 months ago

"Stop usng excuses for that young ass hoe."
You Tube Comment by [ThatFloridaDudeJ](#) in reply to [MsSheba12345](#) ([Show the comment](#)) 3 weeks ago

in response to the Beatking song "Doing It Like Middle School" (LJBOfficial1, 2011), bloggers like jordannmariebaby (2011) show us that there may be hope for changing the "politics of being too fast". Beatking made a half-hearted apology in reference to the controversy. He stated "maybe I went too far...but I did that shit...you know how I get down...I wasn't getting' on her personally...I only think that I said her name twice...not apologizing...I knew that it was trending in and out...she did some grown as shit...she knew that she was doing...whatever she want to do is her business" (Beatking, 2011). Clearly this artist feels little remorse, and notes that he only responded to those that were upset, because he didn't want people to think he was a bad person (Beatking, 2011). Here we see that reputations do matter, but only some people are valued, only

some people can be cognizant of their actions, and be excused for things that may offend the public.

Conclusion

This paper aims to show how the stigmatizing “politics of being too fast” informed public discourses of moral panic, sexual risk, and sexual deviance around urban black girls and adolescents in national, local, and digital public spheres. By examining the influence of political narratives, public policies, and individual interactions with peers, family, and public schools in the nation and in Baltimore City, MD we can see how low-income, urban girls’ social positions *can* and *do* disrupt traditional understandings of who *can* and *should* have access to sexual citizenship in the US. Representations and discourses of American urban black women, statistical data about and the voices of Baltimorean black girls, and the case study of Amber Cole, all serve as examples of why the punitive politics of being fast is an ineffective system of policing sexual desire and sexual citizenship.

If we look beyond the spectacle of these “teen sex scandals” we can analyze how social institutions such as schools, the media, and parents attempt to regulate and hide urban black youth sex cultures, and we can ask ourselves “is this the best practice?” We can also ask “how can social institutions be used in different ways to help youth to navigate this scary, exciting, and exploratory stage of development in the safest manner?” Quite possibly new media will provide new ways of speaking back to public representations, political narratives, structural inequalities, and public policies that aim to hinder black youth’s access to sexual citizenship and bodily agency. This can promote safe and passionate modes to critically learn about and engage in romance, desire, and sex; after youth have discussed their feelings with trusted adults, health practitioners, and/or friends.

References

- Ames, A., Evans, M., Fox, L., Milam, A. J., Petteway, R. J., Rutledge, R. (2011). Baltimore City 2011 Neighborhood Health Profile: Southwest Baltimore. Baltimore City Health Department, <http://www.baltimorehealth.org/info/neighborhood2011/51%20Southwest.pdf>
- Banister, E. and Ross Leadbeater, B. J. (2007). To stay or to leave? How do mentoring groups support healthy dating relationships in high-risk girls? In B.J. Leadbeater & N.Way (Eds.), *Urban girls revisited: Building strengths*. (p.121-141). New York: New York University Press.
- Beatking. (2011, October 17). Beatking Amber Cole apology I guess lol 10/18/11
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=qL6uZwPoTWA#!
- Becker, H. (1973). The Study of Deviance and Labeling Theory Reconsidered, In *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. (p. 165-208). New York: Free Press.
- Bowie, L. (2010). "Fewer black males are dropping out of school in Baltimore: Graduation rate has also improved." *The Baltimore Sun*. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-10-20/news/bs-md-ci-black-male-graduation-20101020_1_black-male-students-graduation-rate-dropout-rate
- Burns, A. & Torre, M. E. (2005). Revolutionary sexualities. *Feminism & Psychology*, 15(10), 21-26.
- Byrd, A. (2004). Claiming Jezebel. In Labaton, V., & Lundy Martin, D. (Eds.), *The Fire this time: Young activists and the new feminism*. (pp.3-18). New York: Anchor Books.

- Cahill, S. (2011). Black sexual citizenship: Understanding the impact of political issues and those at the margins of race, sexuality, gender, and class. In J. Battle & S. L. Barnes (Eds.), *Black sexualities: Probing powers passions, practices, and policies*. (p.190-212). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Carby, H. (1992). Policing the black woman's body in an urban context. *Critical Inquiry* 18, 738-755.
- Cohen, C. J. (2010). *Democracy remixed: Black youth and the future of American politics (Transgressing boundaries: Studies in black politics and black communities)*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, C.J. (2004). Deviance as resistance: A new research agenda for the study of black politics. *Du Bois Review* 1(1), 27-45.
- Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. London: MacGibbon and Kee Ltd.
- Cunningham, E.C. (2011). Creation out of bounds: Toward wholistic identity. In J. Battle & S. L. Barnes (Eds.), *Black sexualities: Probing powers passions, practices, and policies*. (p.37-56). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- DeMennato, G. (2011). Baltimore City public schools in the midst of a sexual tape scandal. *Examiner*. <http://www.examiner.com/gifted-children-in-baltimore/baltimore-city-public-schools-the-midst-of-a-sexual-tape-scandal>
- Espin, O. (1984). Cultural and historical influences on sexuality in Hispanic/Latina women: Implications for psychotherapy. In C. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and danger*. (p. 149-164). Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

- Faiman-Silva, S. (2004). *The courage to connect: Sexuality, citizenship, and community in Princetown*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Ferguson, R. (2001). *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of Desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), p. 29-53.
- Fordham, S. (1993). "Those Loud Black Girls": (Black) Women, Silence, and Gender "Passing" in the Academy. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 24(1), p. 3-32
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*. London: Macmillan.
- Healthy Teen Network. (2010, September 17). *Strategic plan to reduce teen births in Baltimore City*. http://www.baltimorehealth.org/info/teen_preg_report_final.pdf
- Healthy Teen Network (2012, February 8). U.S. Teen Pregnancy Rate Shows Dramatic Decline. http://www.healthyteennetwork.org/vertical/sites/%7BB4D0CC76-CF78-4784-BA7C-5D0436F6040C%7D/uploads/teen_preg_rate_020812.pdf
- Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought*. (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, P. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Hunter, M.A., Guerrero, M., & Cohen, C. (2011). Black youth sexuality: Established paradigms and new approaches. In J. Battle & S. L. Barnes (Eds.), *Black sexualities: Probing powers passions, practices, and policies*. (p.377-400). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

John Hopkins University School of Medicine (2012, March 8). HIV rates for U.S. urban black women five times higher than previously estimated: Data from Baltimore and five other cities cited.

http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/media/releases/hiv_rates_for_us_urban_black_women_five_times_higher_than_previously_estimated

jordannmariebaby. (2011, October 17). Leave Amber Cole Alone. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quR25LaPIp>

Kost, K. & Henshaw, S. (2012, February 1). "U.S. Teenage Pregnancies, Births and Abortions, 2008: National Trends by Age, Race and Ethnicity." Guttmacher Institute.

<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/USTPtrends08.pdf>

LJBOfficial1. (2011, October 17). Beatking - Amber Cole Freestyle 2011

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDMLZyWBMB0>

Moynihan, D. P. (1965). "The Tangle of Pathology" in *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. Office of Policy Planning and Research: United States Department of Labor. <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>

Omolade, B. (1983). Hearts of darkness. In *Powers of desire*, A. Snitow, C. Stansell, & S. Thompson (Eds.), NY: Monthly Review Press, p. 350-367.

Parks, Sheri. (2010). *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture*. New York: One World Books.

Pillow, W. (2000). "Exposed Methodology: The Body as a Deconstructive Practice" in *Working the Ruins*. New York: Routledge.

- Rosenthal, S. L., Burklow, K. A., Lewis, L. M., Succop, P. A., & Biro, F. M. (1997). Heterosexual romantic relationships and sexual behaviors of young adolescent girls. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 21*, 238-243.
- Sears, S. D. (2010). *Imagining black womanhood: The Negotiation of power and identity within the girls empowerment project*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (1987). A sexual scripts approach. In J. H. Greer & W. T. O'Donohue (Eds.), *Theories of human sexuality*. (p.363-383). New York: Plenum.
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (1984) Sexual scripts. *Society, 22*, 52–60.
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (1986). Sexual scripts: Permanence and change. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 15*, 97–120.
- Stephens, D. P. & Phillips, L. (2003). Freaks, gold diggers, divas and dykes: The socio-historical development of African American adolescent females' sexual scripts. *Sexuality and Culture, 7*, 3- 47.
- Stephen, D. P. and Phillips, L. (2005). "Integrating Black Feminist Thought Into Conceptual Frameworks of African American Adolescent Women's Sexual Scripting Processes." *Sexualities, Evolution, and Gender 7*(1), p.37-55.
- Thornton Dill, B. & Zambrana, R. (2009) *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Tolman (1996). Adolescent girls' sexuality: Debunking the myth of the urban girl. In *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities*. (p. 255-271). B. Leadbeater and N. Way (Eds.). New York: New York University..
- Tolman, D. L. (2002). *Dilemmas of desire: Teenage girls talk about sexuality*. Cambridge,

M.A.: Harvard University Press.

Tolman, D.L. (1994). Doing desire: Adolescent girls' struggles for/with sexuality. *Gender and Society*, 8, 324-342.

Tolman, D.L. (2001) Female adolescent sexuality: An argument for a developmental perspective on the new view of women's sexual problems. *Women and Therapy*, 24, 195-209.

Tucker Halpern, C., Joyner, K., Udry, R., and Suchindran, C. (2000). "Smart teens don't have sex (or kiss much either)." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 26, p. 213-225.

Weekes, D. (2002). Get your freak on: how black girls sexualise identity. *Sex Education*, 2(3), p. 251-262.

WJZ 13: CBS Local Media (a). (2011, October 19). Dad furious after teen daughter's sex tape goes viral. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2011/10/19/dad-furious-after-teen-daughters-sex-tape-goes-viral/>

WJZ 13: CBS Local Media (b). (2011, October 23). Video of school students having sex goes viral online [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2011/10/21/video-of-school-students-having-sex-goes-viral-online/>