4. “Keeping It Fresh”: Self-Representation and Challenging Controlling Images in the Inner City

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Chapter 4

“Keeping It Fresh”

Self-Representation and Challenging Controlling Images in the Inner City

For many black women, living in an inner-city community means living in a place that lacks many of the resources that are available in middle-class neighborhoods. This includes grocery stores as well as a variety of retail shops, banks, and other businesses and services. Managing daily life in a place where such resources are missing requires creativity on the part of the people who live there. The strategy of “keeping it fresh” is a result of such creativity. Women in the inner city use available material resources to challenge common expectations that tend to complicate their encounters with others. Through their daily self-presentation these women illustrate how the aesthetic performance of keeping it fresh works as a preventive approach used to buffer oneself from microinteractional assaults. As they challenge prevailing ideas about what it looks like to be poor, black, and female in the inner city—for example, by carefully crafting their style of dress and their deportment—they also aim to keep at bay the hostile public encounters that are often triggered by markers of their class status. Masking this status is crucial, as they still must manage their stigmatized categorical identities of race and gender.
What is the meaning of self-presentation for women living in the inner city? How and why do gender, impression management, systemic inequality, and the underground marketplace work together to inform how these women present themselves with regard to physical appearance? Keeping it fresh allows women to present a version of self that aims to achieve particular ends. Depending upon the audience, this strategy also operates as a means of gaining respect and recognition as something other than poor and in some instances works as form of class passing, if only for a moment.

Women in East Oakland rely on informal retail sale and trade systems in their local communities in an effort to keep it fresh. Goods purchased via the underground marketplace allow these women to maintain a neat appearance enhanced by expensive clothes, shoes, and accessories, which challenges dominant expectations of what it looks like to be poor, black, and female. What does it mean to look “good” versus looking “poor,” and what struggles come with both? My respondents told of the desire to be perceived by outsiders as something different, something better than the image that accompanies being poor, black, and female. As many women reported, it feels good to look good. For most of the women in this study, the outcomes of public encounters largely remain the same while keeping it fresh. Yet respondents repeatedly showed that this strategic performance of a particular aesthetic, although not always successful in changing the perceptions and behavior of outsiders, works consistently to help them feel good and that alone makes managing daily public encounters a bit more bearable.

“It’s the Only Way to Be”

In East Oakland, women commonly reproduce a locally valued form of femininity by “keeping it fresh,” a phrase they use to
refer not only to themselves but also to other women, men, and children. Lauren, a twenty-two-year-old mother of a four-year-old girl, shared with me how she sees the particular style of dress she chooses for herself and her daughter each day and what she understands keeping it fresh to mean for herself and those around her. “It’s the only way to be,” she said with a laugh. “Me and my daughter always stay fly [always look good]. I only get her the freshest shoes and outfits, and her hair is always combed and her hair ties match her clothes everyday. If I stay fresh, she has to keep it fresh too. My sister and my best friend are the same way; they kids keep it fresh, I never see them sporting no garbage. They help keep me on point.”

It is not uncommon to see women keeping it fresh in high-end clothing and accessories while standing in line at the local grocery store. Popular items among residents in the neighborhood and the typical costs in the mainstream retail marketplace include True Religion jeans ($200–$400); Nike Air Jordan gym shoes ($85–$250); Ugg boots ($130–$240); and Juicy Couture track suits ($200–$275). These women are likely to be wearing expensive goods while making purchases with an Electronic Benefit Transfer card or waiting to cash a check at the local check-cashing establishment. How do low-income women gain access to these high-end items? The underground marketplace plays a key role in a woman’s ability to keep it fresh in this setting. In East Oakland it is not uncommon to see cars pull into the parking areas or onto the front lawns of apartment buildings with trunks full of merchandise for sale; many suspect that the merchandise is stolen. Men sell these goods from their cars; women who sell this merchandise typically do so out of their homes, where they transform small living spaces into retail showrooms. The gendered difference in the locations and presentations of these markets is noteworthy. These specific gender displays work to reproduce the local understanding of what it means to be a female versus a male
entrepreneur in the underground marketplace. In the underground marketplace, money, drugs, sex, food stamps, alcohol, and other items can often be exchanged for the latest in designer merchandise for men, women, and children. The informal sale and trade system at work here makes expensive merchandise available to a population generally excluded from the retail segment where such goods normally circulate. This creates a population regularly wearing products specifically unintended for this market based on class and social location. Such commodities are used here as class markers based on their retail and popular value.

Respectability

Living in East Oakland for much of my youth, I became familiar with the presence of the local underground marketplace. My first introduction to this system was as a teenager at the home of Ms. Thomas, the mother of my friend Jasmine. Ms. Thomas worked as an administrative assistant at the county hospital by day; in the evening and on weekends she sold what she refers to as “hot” or stolen clothes and other goods out of a spare bedroom she had turned into a display area in her small single-family home. As a teen I spent many hours after school and weekends at Ms. Thomas’s home hanging out with Jasmine. During this time I watched clothes, shoes, accessories, and the occasional television or computer being delivered or picked up from her home. I routinely saw Ms. Thomas systematically taking orders for such items only in person, negotiating prices for these goods, and holding a steady client base in her second job as an entrepreneur in the underground marketplace. Ms. Thomas was always very strict about her method of payment. “Cash only and only cash,” she would say; no credit or barter was allowed under any circumstances.

Spending time at Ms. Thomas’s home I saw the comings and goings of both men and women who sold goods locally as
she did. I looked on as they made exchanges of goods to later sell to a particular “contact” or customer that one had and the other did not. Ms. Thomas used to regularly say that she didn’t mind exchanging goods with other entrepreneurs, but never with customers. She often complained about losing business because some entrepreneurs in the area allowed customers to pay for goods in a variety of ways other than cash. She criticized others in the industry for increasingly accepting payment for goods in the forms of drugs, food stamps, alcohol, and even sex. Yet in whatever form customers paid for their goods many neighborhood residents came to rely on underground entrepreneurs like Ms. Thomas in order to keep it fresh.

I offer the following excerpt from my field notes as an illustration of one young woman and her infant son wearing the kinds of goods sold from homes like Ms. Thomas’s and from cars in the neighborhood. This young mother and son display a “fresh” version of self as they wait in line at the local check cashing business:

A young woman who looks to be about 19 or 20 years old enters this 24-hour check-cashing business pushing a baby stroller. The woman waits patiently in line for her turn behind two older black men. I observe her style of dress, which stands out in this working-poor community. She wears large black sunglasses on top of her head, holding back her shoulder-length hair, which appears to have just been professionally styled. I notice a brown monogram Gucci baby bag hanging from the handle of the stroller, and the young woman carries a matching belt bag clipped around her waist. She wears a white tank top and tight blue jeans and has two long gold necklaces around her neck. When she leans over to pick up her baby, who begins to cry softly, I see that the infant is wearing blue jeans and a tiny white T-shirt, and both mother and son have on
matching brand new Nike gym shoes. She wears a large diamond ring on her left ring finger and what look to be six diamond encrusted gold bangles on her right arm.

This young woman’s accessories, clothing, and jewelry disrupt the dominant image of physical dress for a young black mother entering a check-cashing establishment in a distressed urban neighborhood. She and her infant son are dressed in expensive goods while seeking out a service that is generally reserved for the poor with no bank accounts. Additionally, she is in an urban community riddled with poverty where there are no stores that sell the type of merchandise she is wearing.

Here is another example of a woman and her young daughter keeping it fresh as they exit a local nail salon:

A young woman in her early 20s exits a local nail salon with a little girl who looks just like her and appears to be 3 or 4 years old. They stand just steps away from me as we all wait for the bus to arrive. I notice that the little girl and the woman both wear sandals revealing their freshly painted toes. I notice the little girl wearing skinny jeans, a tiny leather jacket, and child-size sunglasses as she holds her hands out in front of her as she waits, not to ruin her manicure. Her hair is neatly arranged in four braids with bright pink barrettes on the ends that match her sparkly pink sandals. I hear the little girl say to the young woman, “Mommy, pick me up.” The woman replies, “I can’t; I don’t want to mess up our nails.” The little girl looks slightly puzzled at first, then looks down at her hands and continues to marvel at her brightly painted fingernails.

While I made observations in East Oakland, encounters like these became routine. At this bus stop the young mother seemed well invested in the appearance of her little girl. The child was wearing a thoughtfully put together and seemingly expensive
ensemble; in addition, she just had her nails professionally done though she looked to be younger than five years of age. As they waited for the bus to arrive, I saw some class-based contradictions in this case. These presentations of self for mother and child challenge stereotypes held by others of what black women in a poor inner-city community ought to look like.

Black women also make distinctions about other black women; some of what they are doing here is distinguishing themselves from “ghetto chicks,” a derisive label used to describe low-income women whose behavior, beliefs, and demeanor contrast with mainstream and black middle-class expectations of appropriate and respectable femininity (Jones 2010, 99; Thompson and Keith 2004, 58). “Ghetto chicks” is another controlling image that women encounter each day. The mother and daughter were in a troubled urban neighborhood and taking public transportation, yet the presentation of the little girl with regard to dress and appearance suggested that they were not low-income or struggling, as many in the neighborhood were. This type of display can work to challenge stereotypical understandings of being poor, black, and female looks like. In many cases this project of keeping it fresh unfolds in venues almost exclusively populated by the poor; nevertheless, it is important for these mothers that their presentation of style distinguishes them from those recognized as less deserving of respect such as ghetto chicks or the prostitutes and transients who frequently loiter in the area. This woman and her daughter present themselves in a particular way that suggests they are different from much of the population here (Bettie 2003, 50) and should be recognized as such. A part of distinguishing oneself from ghetto chicks through keeping it fresh is marking oneself as someone different, someone deserving of respect. By keeping it fresh a particular type of locally valued form of black femininity is being produced. As women perform this particular form of self-presentation they situate themselves somewhere in
between the ghetto chick and a respectable lady. The work of keeping it fresh is an investment in a gender identity generally consistent with mainstream notions of respectable black femininity (Collins 2005).

A common belief is that women dress up primarily to get the attention of men or to compete with other women for men, but the women in this study shared other important motivations for keeping it fresh. For mothers, extending this fresh self-presentation to their children made them feel better as both mother and child appeared to be deserving of recognition and respect whether others knew they were poor or not. A desired outcome of keeping it fresh is this sort of recognition by others, including neighbors, friends, and outsiders. This recognition involves being accountable to a normative standard of middle-class styles of dress and self-presentation as understood locally (Jenness and Fenstermaker 2014, 10). Among an almost exclusively poor population, it is significant for women and girls to distinguish themselves and to be recognized as more than poor even if they are not. This recognition as people deserving of respect, even for a moment, makes this routine work of keeping it fresh worthwhile.

The experience of both being and looking poor is a complicated one. As respondents explained to me, keeping it fresh is important because what is almost as bad as being poor is looking poor. As one woman noted, “Yes, many people would probably consider me poor, because I am and I have to live with that every day, but I don’t have to look that way.”

“So what does poor look like?” I asked Tameka, a twenty-year-old lifelong Oakland resident.

“You know, throw-away stuff, donation clothes and no-name sneakers; or if you’re lucky, Walmart clothes. The stuff nobody really wants, but has, because it’s either that or nothing.” Tameka’s description of what “poor” looks like echoes the widespread attitude about poor people: that to be poor is
to be lazy, ignorant, backward, and just plain not good enough (Callahan 2008, 372). Keeping it fresh works not just to challenge dominant understandings of what raced and gendered poverty looks like but also as a way to achieve recognition as someone deserving of respect, even if only in the short term. Achieving this recognition is about feeling that you are as good as those who actually are of a higher-class status (Edgerton 1993, 138–139). The work of keeping it fresh is in part about avoiding the stigma of poverty, but it is also about gaining rewards associated with “looking” like a person deserving of respect.

Why “Keeping It Fresh?”

The project of keeping it fresh is employed in large part as a response to the class-based stigma that accompanies racialized urban poverty. In his study of welfare in America, Mark Robert Rank found that the majority of the welfare recipients he talked to had developed very calculated strategies through which to protect themselves from the subtle scrutiny that accompanies the status of welfare recipient; he discusses how several women made it a point not to “look like the stereotypical welfare mother” (1994, 139). This includes dressing up in nice clothing and jewelry, shopping late at night, only making purchases from store clerks they know personally, or in some cases sending others to use their food stamps for them. This is all in an effort not to fit the image of a welfare recipient and to thus avoid the constant rudeness and dehumanization often experienced at the hands of checkout personnel (Rank 1994, 137–139).

Keeping it fresh works to help women be recognized as something other than poor. Many people cannot pass for something other than impoverished because others know about this aesthetic performance and how it is commonly used. Others also know that their neighbors are poor regardless of how they dress. Nevertheless, hiding the stigma of poverty, whether it is
a secret or not, is important. While passing locally is rarely successful, keeping it fresh operates as a way to be recognized as something other than poor locally. This tactic is employed by black women in an effort to look like those who are deserving of respect based on their presentation of style. Though concealing the stigma of poverty through passing (Jenness and Fenstermaker 2014, 9) is unlikely in the neighborhood, achieving recognition as respected by others in the community can momentarily outshine one’s poverty, something that usually takes center stage. Beyond the local community there seems to be another audience where passing is possible: the imagined rest of the world. This audience takes the form of store personnel and others who come to this community but are not considered members of it; these outsiders do not live in the neighborhood, and they are unfamiliar with those who do. Women here can encounter outsiders on the street, in local businesses, and while riding the city bus. Keeping a “fresh” self-presentation supports the work women do to be recognized as respectable even when representing a class status other than poor is not possible.

Keeping it fresh extends previous scholarship and the concepts of dressing up and covering through its specific connection to the underground marketplace (Kaplan 1997; Rank 1994). This method of masking one’s true class status to the outside world while contradicting normative expectations of poor black women through physical appearance and styles of dress would not be nearly as prominent in the East Oakland community without the accessibility of goods provided by the underground marketplace. In the following account Ron and Avis, a middle-aged black couple who worked nine-to-five jobs but also self-identified as “small time hustlers,” shared “how it all works.” As Avis, a slender woman with a chocolate brown complexion who stood barely five feet tall and wore her salt-and-pepper hair pulled back into a tight ponytail, explained,
Without people like me and my man Ron, most of the people around here would walk around looking like the world expects all of us to look, like nothing ’cause we black and ain’t got nothing, really. But we bring nice clothes, shoes, whatever you want right to your door for a good price. Without us or somebody else bringing the goods to you it would be damn near impossible to look good, the way most folks around here are struggling. How I see it, everybody wins. You get the stuff you want but can’t normally afford at a discount, and we make a living at the same time. We all are struggling, but at least this way everybody gets something.

Ron, a short round man in his late forties with a cinnamon brown complexion and a bald head, described for me a little about how the pricing system worked for the goods that he and his girlfriend Avis sold out of their van:

Bottom line, everything is negotiable ’cause the point is to sell it as quick as you can, not carry it around. If I have ten boxes of gym shoes that sell in the store for $150, I try to get $50–$60 for a pair. If they want more than one, I may give them two for $80–$85. Or if I have an order and know the size I’m looking for, I may get $600 worth of stuff from a particular store and sell the whole thing to one person for $250–$300. It all depends on the day, what we got, and what we need.

While neither would disclose the ways in which they specifically acquired merchandise, the underground marketplace in East Oakland primarily consists of selling and trading what are often stolen goods to community residents. As longtime East Oakland resident Charles, a black man in his early fifties, made clear when asked about where he thought a lot of the goods came from, “Yeah, the stuff floating around here is sto-
len. I think pretty much everybody is aware of that. I mean, some of the stuff still has [store] tags on it, and those young people selling it surely didn’t sew those clothes or make those toys, I’m sure of that.”

Participation in the underground marketplace is one specific entrepreneurial strategy at work within the larger capitalist market. Although this system may impact some specific businesses, it does not undermine capitalism itself, largely because its profits circulate in the greater market. Yet this very particular niche serves inner-city communities with basic wants and needs that are typically unavailable to local residents. As underground entrepreneurs, Ron and Avis explained how goods are made available to those who want to appear to have more disposable income and higher class status than they actually do and described some of what it takes to maintain the sort of appearance that is upheld by those recognized as deserving of respect. For women in East Oakland the work of keeping it fresh is done in the hope of gaining some respect.

Respondents interviewed for this study described experiences purchasing or trading goods from people in the area selling them out of cars or living spaces. One woman stated openly that she did not think of buying or selling these goods as stealing; she thought of it as taking care of her children and herself. She went on to say that the “true robbery” is the retail cost of goods and it is those who create these prices who are the criminals. This claim is complicated by the reality that many retail establishments refuse to open businesses in poor inner-city communities. East Oakland resident Mara, a twenty-three-year-old mother of a newborn son, expressed how she felt about supporting the local underground marketplace. “I don’t take the stuff, anyway,” she explained. “I just buy it from the guys around here who have it. I mean, I don’t have a car to get out of here the way I would like to, but I still want nice things and my baby deserves to have nice things too, even if I
can’t afford to get them from the store like some people can. Anyway, the people hustling the clothes and stuff over here are just trying to live like the rest of us. I guess in a way we help each other out.

For Mara, keeping it fresh is in part about wanting “nice things,” though her lower-class status indicates she is unworthy of them. Many people living within a consumer capitalist culture desire nice things just as Mara does, regardless of their class status. She explained some of the challenges of traveling outside her residential community. Not having a car can make traveling beyond the borders of one’s neighborhood a challenge. It is a luxury to be able to come and go whenever one wants to and to have the financial means to purchase the nice things that are advertised on television or on billboards. This interview excerpt reveals that residents believe they deserve nice things, even if they cannot afford them, and the larger social order designates their race and class as justification for keeping such retail establishments out of their communities.

In Mara’s account there is a distinction made between those who take the merchandise and those who purchase it. Mara explained that she didn’t take the stolen merchandise as a means of implying that there is a difference between her and those who steal directly from stores. Yet only a few moments later, it seems that this statement was slightly reconsidered. She went on to say that those stealing and then reselling the merchandise “are just trying to live like the rest of us,” which suggests that they are just trying to manage daily life in the inner city as she and others are. Mara pointed out that this exchange is reciprocal where “in a way we help each other out.” This explains how each participant has a commodity, a service, or money that the other needs, and in turn they both help each other meet basic daily needs through this system of exchange, which occurs between members of a local social network. This community-based network complements that described by
Carol Stack, in which goods are most often bought and sold, rather than traded, among community members (1974, chap. 3). Nevertheless, these two methods of goods exchange share the central component of community. In the case Mara described, she considered herself supporting local underground entrepreneurs by purchasing the often stolen goods they have for sale. She also perceived these local hustlers as supporting the local community by acquiring and selling goods to residents that they wanted but could not otherwise access or afford. She described a type of mutual dependency between local residents who purchase goods and the hustlers who provide them. One party needs the goods, as is Mara’s case, because she does not have a car and this restricts her access to mainstream retail businesses; on the occasions she can get to conventional retail stores she often cannot pay the prices these establishments charge for goods. In turn, the underground entrepreneurs need the revenue from the goods they sell out of their cars or homes to provide for their own basic needs. This system of exchange is mutually dependent on both parties remaining active participants in order for everyone to obtain the goods and money they need to keep their lives running from day to day.

Controlling Images

The importance of women in the inner city carefully crafting and recrafting their presentation of self is in large part a result of mainstream perceptions and portrayals of poor black womanhood. Patricia Hill Collins describes the powerful impact of dominant controlling images of black women as bad mothers, welfare queens, bitches, and whores and details how such labels have been deeply internalized by black and white men, women, and youth and thus quickly and routinely associated with black female bodies. Furthermore, such powerful images have become widely portrayed in the mainstream media, including music and television, and this has influenced the prevalent connection
between these controlling labels and the image of the black woman in the minds of countless individuals all over the world (Collins 2005, chap. 4). Yet the power of such images and associations are further complicated by poverty and the day-to-day realities of living in suffering urban communities. For generations, the black poor have been labeled unrefined, loud, and uncivilized as a population and in terms of public behavior. Acceptance of such labels as true has encouraged a widely accepted distinction between the public behavior of poor urban blacks and the “conventional” middle class. In an effort to dispel the negative ideals and assessments associated with poor black womanhood, many women in the inner city creatively work to reinvent parts of their self-presentation. Keeping it fresh is a key component used to help buffer black women from the negative evaluations commonly made about them by outsiders.

In their landmark study of urban life, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton ([1945] 1993) note that the public behavior of poor blacks is expected to be loud, boisterous, and unrefined, the opposite of conventional middle-class American public behavior. Their description of this very particular kind of behavior reflects common assumptions about the self-presentation of poor inner-city blacks. This is where the “front” or presentation of self (Goffman 1959) is key. Those who are highly regarded socially, well educated, and refined take pride and value in how they present themselves and are received by the world. Drake and Cayton explain the significance of the well-manicured front as a symbol of progress—specifically for blacks living in urban areas that place clear limitations on upward mobility and on “getting ahead” socially and economically (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993, 388–390, 519).

Elijah Anderson’s study of young black men and public interactions describes the process of passing inspection as part of interacting in a street environment. He points out how multiple characteristics, including clothing, jewelry, race, gender,
and age, work to mark someone as predator versus prey (Anderson 1990; see also Goffman 1971). Anderson underscores the efforts some young men take to offset and disprove many of the assumptions that outsiders have about urban neighborhoods. Many outsiders see these communities as breeding grounds for crime, danger, delinquency, drugs, prostitution, ignorance, and persistent poverty, and some residents attempt to refute the negative assumptions about the people who live in such communities through individual interactions. Keeping it fresh is a way of contradicting the controlling images of poor, black women; presenting a neat appearance enhanced by expensive clothes, shoes, and accessories also works as a type of campaign for respectability that connects these women to an aspect of a more respectable form of black femininity. Nevertheless, outsiders’ destructive, oppressive, and controlling images of these women still persist.

**What It Means to “Look Good”**

When discussing with respondents why keeping a fresh appearance is important, I repeatedly heard “I want others to see me differently”—specifically, as more than being poor. Keeping it fresh is an intentional aesthetic performance through which women use available material resources to challenge controlling images linked to being poor, female, and black, at least for a short time. This strategy helps these women to step away from the feelings of stigma or shame that come along with such labels. Alicia, a twenty-two-year-old black woman and longtime East Oakland resident, told me how her own experiences as a child informed how and why she wants her baby to always look fresh. “I like it when my baby has the newest clothes and shoes out of all the kids at her daycare,” she explains. “I never had really nice stylish clothes when I was a kid, and I want my baby to have that. She needs to know that it is important to always look good. People see you different when you keep yourself up.” Alicia shows that
this project of “keeping yourself up” is fundamentally interactive. As she decides how to dress her baby she is processing past evaluations others have made about her self-presentation. She draws on her own experience of not having what she describes as fashionable clothing as a child. As a result, she feels that others perceive her differently, as less than. She has adopted this idea as a value of sorts in an effort to put off experiences of shame and discomfort for her own child. Alicia implies that others see a person as acceptable when they have a neat and fashionable appearance, a type of positive distinction. To be different in this case is to be seen as better than those deemed as disheveled or poorly presented. Many of the women I have talked to describe a disheveled appearance as “busted” or “janky”—that is, ugly, cheap, and of poor quality. In this case, different means presentable in a fashion acceptable by middle-class standards of appearance. Tiyanna, a twenty-four-year-old community resident, explained how she feels when she keeps it fresh through a system of sale and trade that operates within the local underground marketplace, particularly in light of how she struggles to make it every day while recognizing the legacy of struggle she fears she will pass on to her children: “I struggle every day of my life, and my two sons probably will too. It’s cool having a nice outfit or some nice new shoes so you can at least look good while you out here fighting to try to make it.” Tiyanna suggests the value in this presentation of self (Goffman 1959) while living a life complicated by continuous struggle and foreseeing this same existence for her children. It seems that keeping a clean, neat, and stylish appearance aids in managing this everyday fight. Engaging in this particular form of self-presentation operates as a display of confidence for Tiyanna as she manages her daily life. Looking good makes her feel better about herself and her children and how they cope with the struggles they encounter each day.
In her work on women and the politics of appearance, Wendy Chapkis emphasizes how a woman’s appearance makes a statement about her race, class, gender, and sexuality—particularly in a social world divided by these categories. Physical appearance works to convey to onlookers whether one has a big paycheck or none at all or holds professional power or not. Such statements further indicate a person’s belonging to a certain class, including all of the benefits or stigmas that accompany the determined status. Chapkis asserts that an evaluation of power is made based on visual statements of dress and demeanor (1986, 79–80). It is the outcome of such evaluations that women in poor urban communities hope to change through keeping it fresh. Kelly, a twenty-four-year-old lifelong East Oakland resident, told me why looking good is so important to her. “I have a lot to cry about,” she explained. “I mean, my life has been hard for my age, but I still have to get up and go out and work and survive, and I want to try and feel good like everybody else, so I make it a point to look my best. It’s important to me to stay fresh, and it feels good to stay fresh too. Who don’t like it when their friends or somebody they know says, ‘You look good’ or ‘That’s a cute outfit’?”

Kelly explains how looking good is significant to her in the context of living a tough life. Being able to present herself in a way that makes her feel good despite having “a lot to cry about” exemplifies how keeping it fresh operates as a coping strategy, a method that women use to help manage the stress that accompanies troubled inner-city life. Though this strategy may not change public interactions for women like Kelly, it does make them feel good within the confines of their distressed urban lives, which even for a moment is a success.

In the following account Courtney, a twenty-five-year-old mother of two boys and one girl, describes how she feels
when she can offer her children more than basic necessities and how she feels when she cannot:

My kids are good. They listen and mind and don’t start a lot of trouble at school. They are thankful for whatever I give them, but like a lot of kids they want new video games and jeans with glitter and brand-name this and brand-name that—stuff I can’t afford. I feel bad, like I should be doing more as their mother when Christmas and birthdays come around and I can’t give them something extra special. Last Christmas I was almost as excited as them when I bought a video game system they had been begging me for. It cost $300 on sale in the store and I got it for, like, $65 from one of these guys selling stuff near my house. It felt really good to see them so happy.

Women like Courtney mention feeling like “better women” (and specifically, “better mothers”) when they are able to give their children things that they themselves never had as children but always wanted—popular toys, clothes, gym shoes, and the like. Yet these same women frequently describe their experiences of hostility and humiliation while shopping in local stores or just walking down the street. Many of them described how they didn’t want to be seen as poor or treated as less than. Nevertheless, their treatment in public seemed to remain the same. Overall, my respondents did not report being treated with a great deal of kindness or respect when they dressed nicely, and they did not see their daily public interactions with others change to any degree that might be equivalent to how they perceived the nonpoor as being treated.

Keeping it fresh appears to operate largely as a coping strategy that helps these women manage the pressures of the stigmatized images of who they are. There are, however, consequences to keeping it fresh. It is about a feeling of distin-
guishing oneself from those considered less deserving of respect, and feeling good because one looks good in a place where there isn’t a lot to feel good about. Although keeping it fresh does not transform the dominant controlling images of who black women are assumed to be and appear to be, this aesthetic performance is of value to these women as members of the community. To be recognized by others as respectable and to feel better about oneself because of such recognition even for a moment works to maintain a sense of personal dignity in a place that marks poor black women as unworthy.

Maintaining a fresh appearance for women in this urban space is a significant expression of normative notions of femininity, respectable blackness, and standardized conceptions of class. Alicia and Courtney (discussed earlier in the chapter) both told me that, as mothers, keeping a fresh appearance was about more than just them; it was about their children also. Courtney demonstrated gendered ideas about mothering as she described the positive feelings she experienced and how her role as a mother was in some ways reinforced when she could provide special gifts for her children—items that for her were usually unattainable outside the underground marketplace. Alicia viewed “looking good” as a value of sorts that she was already instilling in her infant daughter. These understandings of acceptable appearance and good mothering reflect a status other than that of the “bad black mother” (Collins 2005, 131), a status largely considered to be normative for poor inner-city black women. Alicia and Courtney keep it fresh in part to be recognized as respectable women and mothers. They present themselves and their children in a way that distances them from normative images of poverty and blackness. They purchase expensive clothes, shoes, and accessories for themselves and their children, a seemingly uncharacteristic behavior for women of their status. Both women demonstrate that for them looking good means adopting a style and quality of dress
that signals middle-class notions of acceptable femininity and blackness. Even though both women are poor and black and live in the inner city, they work to display a particular image and to be recognized through their physical dress as other than poor, even to those in their neighborhood who know their true status. The fact that many residents in the neighborhood are familiar with the concept of keeping it fresh, and the impoverished status of others, keeps women like Alicia and Courtney from “passing” in their immediate community. Yet the work done to be recognized as someone more than poor remains central. To be recognized as respectable black women and mothers is a key motivation in using this strategy. In this way, these women accept normative models of white middle-class femininity and respectable blackness. To do this they contradict prevailing ideas about what it means to look like a poor black woman (Bettie 2003, 49–52; Collins 2005, chap. 4; Jones 2010, 7–12), which, in the words of one respondent, is “hair not done and garbage clothes, just ugly.”

“I Am Poor, But I Don’t Have to Look That Way”

Many social workers, government officials, and members of the middle class have attacked poor blacks for using what limited resources they have to buy expensive goods when it appears that other needs are left unmet (Ladner 1971); if poor blacks would only realign their priorities and delay such pleasures, they would have a brighter future. Yet middle-class Americans, including the black middle class (many of whom live beyond their means), do not experience such stigma. Joyce A. Ladner emphasizes that for many young, poor, black girls who live without many of life’s necessities, expensive and fashionable clothing can operate as a means of temporary compensation for so many of the things that they must go without. To be well dressed or better dressed in comparison to others locally can make one appear through her
presentation of self to be equal or at times superior to peers and to those who subjugate her and her existence on a daily basis. Often, poor blacks are accused of being preoccupied with material goods, made evident by having expensive clothes while living in poverty. Yet the larger U.S. social order has proved to have a greater commitment to, and places a superior value on, goods and consumerism. This is apparent in the vastly uneven levels of resources allocated to social and human services versus those spent on war (Ladner 1971).

The role of luxury consumerism and the desire for such goods on the part of poor urban blacks and other groups in the United States is in large part a result of contemporary nationwide marketing strategies proving victorious (Nightingale 1995). Many poor blacks across gender lines embrace the American consumer culture in an effort to soothe the constant wounding of racial degradation and isolation and the distress of poverty. Yet stigma still persists for poor blacks when they are only embracing the American value of abundance as advertising strategies have intended. The accounts provided by women in this study reveal that due to the inadequate local retail sector, residents are often limited to purchasing necessary goods through the underground marketplace, the illicit system that provides a variety of often stolen products at prices well below retail and otherwise unavailable in the community.

Many of the women who live in East Oakland struggle to make ends meet, and traveling outside their community for goods and services takes extra time and money. Not only does buying and trading through the underground marketplace save these women time, but the goods for sale through this system come at a fraction of the manufacturer’s suggested retail price, thus providing many residents the opportunity to acquire goods they otherwise could not afford. This makes the process of maintaining a stylish appearance enhanced by expensive clothes, shoes, and accessories possible. Even so, if there was a
legitimate retail core in the neighborhood it is easy to imagine that residents like Mara would not be able to consistently afford the goods sold at retail prices; thus it is quite possible that many of these women would still engage in the underground marketplace as a means for keeping it fresh. Through maintaining this particular sort of appearance, poor inner-city residents have the chance to re-create their presentation of self, including the class status they present to others, though their true impoverished status remains the same. Although women are not actually changing their class position, they are using available resources to challenge common expectations that tend to complicate their encounters with others. Erica, a woman in her early twenties, described how she feels when she “looks” poor while out in public: “I can’t stand it when people look at me and can say, ‘She’s poor.’ Like they can just tell from how I look or how I dress. We were poor growing up, but my grandmother always did her best to have us looking good. Our clothes were always clean and ironed. I take pride in looking the best I can, and if buying my stuff off of the street is a part of it, then, oh well.

These comments explain how Erica feels when being subjected to the controlling image and label of poverty, and her experience gives a glimpse of some of the feelings that accompany negotiating her physical appearance as an identity marker that may reveal her class status. She talked about the immense pride she feels in looking her best and how the informal retail system in her community helps make this possible. Without this system in place she might not be able to present herself in this way, increasing the level of emotional labor and pain that can come with being—and appearing to be—poor. Brittney, a twenty-three-year-old East Oakland resident, described some of the complicated feelings she has around being marked as poor even when dressed nicely and the responses she receives from others when she keeps it fresh: “Sometimes people who I don’t even know look at me like something is wrong when they
Brittney’s account describes the evaluation from others when a woman’s physical dress defies prevailing images of what it looks like to be poor, and reveals how she interacts with the expectations of others—specifically, how she presents herself in a way that contradicts the expectations of others about how she should look because of where she lives. In this case the context of a poor urban neighborhood challenges the clean, neat, and expensive appearance Brittney presents. Through such an appearance she is working to explicitly defy dominant understandings of racialized poverty that are placed upon residents of inner-city communities. In addition to the categorical identities that mark her, like race and gender, it is also assumed that she is marked, and stigmatized, by racialized space.

**Keeping It Fresh as a Gendered Strategy**

Elaine Bell Kaplan notes that the harsh day-to-day realities of poor young black women include “[being] housed in threatening, drug-infested environments, schooled in jail-like institutions, and obstructed from achieving the American Dream.” These women are stigmatized, “disqualified from full participation [in society] and . . . marked as deviant” (1997, xxi). These daily experiences encourage the development of strategies to manage survival within such troubled circumstances; such strategies are consistently critiqued by the young black women who employ them, and are constantly modified to fit the changing demands of daily life. The development and use of the creative survival strategies employed by black women in the inner city are an outcome of race, gender, and class inequalities rather than a unique characteristic of black culture (Kaplan 1997, 7).

Kaplan’s findings align with Nikki Jones’s discussion of situated survival strategies, and especially the ways in which
women and girls present themselves in public and navigate urban space (i.e., situational avoidance; Jones 2010). As young women employ these strategies, they pay close attention to how they present themselves in public. In her work on young black mothers, Kaplan (1997) suggests that girls engage in three types of impression management: dressing up, avoidance, and revision. In the first instance, young women dress up—both in terms of their physical appearance and emotion. This tactic can work in two ways: as an emotionally protective mechanism and as a mask to hide certain stigmatized identity markers. Blackness and womanness are readily visible for most of these women, but the presentation of class is more malleable. If one can dress up and appear to transgress the boundary of poverty even within an impoverished community, the hope is to reduce class stigma, even if only in the short term. Robin D. G. Kelley (1993) discusses how dressing up operated for poor blacks in a historical context and describes how southern black sharecroppers, coal miners, tobacco farmers, and domestic workers used dressing up as a way of detaching from the humiliation of work. Kaplan (1997) states in her discussion of avoidance, the second type of impression management young women employ, that it involves maintaining the privacy of class status by staying away from institutions that could expose it (e.g., the welfare office). In the third form of impression management, revision, young women rewrite their personal story, omitting information that could expose their class status. The power to rewrite one’s story allows for hope beyond current circumstance; the American dream remains within reach in a rewritten story.

In Erving Goffman’s discussion of gender display, which can be understood as a form of “expressive behavior,” he talks about the “controlling role of the performance” (1976, 1): how people providing a display can directly influence how they are perceived by viewers depending upon how they style
themselves in terms of gender, hair, clothing, and the like, particularly over time. This is central to the work of keeping it fresh. Though it is not always assured, generally as a person’s style and the interaction become routine, so does the perception of a particular identity that is being applied to them by a second party. Goffman shows that gender displays are a lot like any other type of ritualized forms of expression. Expressing one’s class status through physical markers while interacting with others can mirror primary elements of the larger social structure and a person’s place within it. Nevertheless, displays can just as easily refute the reality of the social situation or the status of the person providing them. Ultimately, displays give only a small indication of a much larger and complex social arrangement or identity (Goffman 1976).

Understanding gender as a role conceals the work required in producing gender in everyday encounters, while understanding gender as a display pushes it to the margin of interactions. Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) note how gender is an accomplishment that interactions are fundamentally organized around. They argue that members within an interaction organize their numerous and changing actions to express their gender category as it is understood within a given context. Understanding gender as an accomplishment requires understanding gender as an interaction that is evaluated by others with beliefs rooted in the biological differences in gender categories and gendered behavior.

Interactions are also organized around other categorical identities like race and class, and it is within social interaction that individuals represent themselves in connection to race, class, and gender. It is at this moment that other members of the interaction are summoned to evaluate those actions as suitable or not based on prevailing social understandings of natural and unnatural ways of being for members of the particular race, gender, and class category in question (West and
Fenstermaker 2002a, 142). The accomplishment of race, class, and gender through interactions works to either legitimate or refute existing social arrangements and expectations linked to particular groups (West and Fenstermaker 2002b, 53). For the women in this study, this means always being accountable to the expectations of what raced and gendered poverty looks like in their local community; each day when they leave their residences, they go on display for people they know and those they don’t. The work of keeping it fresh is about contradicting the prevailing notions of what poverty looks like in terms of physical dress. This intentional form of self-presentation works to discredit any evaluation labeling those who keep it fresh as poor, if even for a moment. Women develop a presentation of style (marked by expensive clothes, shoes, and accessories) that they associate with normative expectations of what it means to look middle class to distinguish themselves as something better than poor. They present a version of self in this manner in an effort to be evaluated according to middle-class standards of dress and respectability. For those who know the truth and evaluate these women according to their lower-class status regardless of their self-presentation, the aim is to achieve a particular type of recognition, to be evaluated and recognized based on a higher standard of expectations than that commonly associated with poor black women in the inner city.

The particular ways in which women and girls present themselves in urban public space represent their efforts to distinguish themselves from “ghetto chicks,” a derisive label for low-income women whose behavior, beliefs, and demeanor contrast with mainstream and black middle-class expectations of appropriate and respectable femininity (Jones 2010, 99; Thompson and Keith 2004, 58). Young women in the neighborhood want to be recognized as deserving respect based on their presentation of style. As they maintain a particular type of physical dress and presentation in interaction with others,
they “do gender,” “do race,” and “do class” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 137), and they challenge the controlling images typically associated with poor black women and the dominant discourse in society—one that excludes the experiences of black women and girls.

The process of negotiating gender, race, and class through a particular style of self-presentation is complicated for women in the inner city. This process is about far more than just not fitting in or being perceived as more than poor. Craig Haney sheds light on the very specific experiences, influences, and impact of otherness within the larger context of systemic inequality; he discusses the presence of biographical racism and how it operates as the “accumulation of race-based obstacles, indignities, and criminogenic influences that characterize the life histories of so many African American capital defendants” (2005, 194). Haney explains that the “continued correlation of race with so many other painful and potentially damaging experiences in our society” directly shapes the life histories and biographies of those exposed to them (2005, 194). To further uncover some of the elements of biographical racism, he draws on urban poverty, the distress of chronic financial hardship, and the fact that African American youth are more likely to live under such conditions than are other youth. He notes the findings of several scholars and how many poor inner-city youth have discovered remarkable ingenuity in terms of developing coping strategies to manage their daily lives. Yet Haney reasserts Carl H. Nightingale’s (1995) point that such learned expertise is “no match for the physical toll of poverty and its constant frustrations and humiliations” (Nightingale, quoted in Haney 2005, 195).

Haney notes other aspects of biographical racism that particularly impact large numbers of African American youth. These include encountering expressions of racial hatred, living
in racially segregated neighborhoods, and enduring the suspicion that is widespread among persons in authority. Many black youth growing up in distressed inner-city communities also contend with violence in their neighborhoods and schools, and this puts them at further risk of victimization in places that should be physically and psychologically safe for them. Living under such circumstances informed by the long arm of biographical racism predisposes these youth for increased rates of posttraumatic stress disorder as well as troubled and problematic futures (Haney 2005, 195–197).

Through understanding some of the impact of biographical racism in addition to racialized poverty on the lives of poor black youth one may see how informal and illegal systems of retail sale and trade develop and operate in urban communities. In neighborhoods harshly affected by crime, joblessness, poverty, and a lack of local resources and retail establishments, developing independent retail sale and trade operations can be one of the few ways to supplement income for residents—including persons exiting the criminal justice system. Additionally, there is a demand for goods and institutions in such communities where residents are often confined; it is a market that many large and independent retail establishments choose not to enter.

The enormous force of biographical racism is illustrated not only through the lack of local resources, poverty, and social isolation present in communities like East Oakland but also through the emotional impact of stigma and inequality experienced by those who live there. For women like Mara, Alicia, and Kelly the strain of poverty is something they are all too familiar with. It is a painful reality many also see in their own children’s future. A particularly distressing aspect of this experience of raced, classed, and gendered poverty is the side they must show the world each day through self-presentation. For women in the neighborhood, keeping it fresh operates as a
buffer between themselves and public evaluations of who they are or are assumed to be—poor and unworthy of respect. While being recognized as respectable or passing as a member of the middle class is not guaranteed by keeping it fresh, performing this particular type of self-presentation works to distinguish these women from those seen as less worthy of respect. Being able to actively distinguish oneself from these further marginalized groups reinforces the notion that they are someone worthy of respect despite the prevailing notions and images that say otherwise. They are certain that no matter how they are perceived by neighbors, friends, or outsiders, they feel better when they look better, and this alone makes keeping it fresh important, particularly as they manage the daily struggles of distressed inner-city life.

What about the future of women who live in the inner city? Will they continue to feel the need to keep it fresh as a way to manage encounters complicated by their race, class, and gender? The current conditions of life in the troubled inner city assure that struggle is very likely to continue for its residents. The respondent accounts shared in this study suggest that the need to feel better about oneself while experiencing harsh living conditions, a lack of resources, and raced, classed, and gendered inequality is a reality for many women. Keeping it fresh is one way in which women work to perform a version of self they perceive as respectable in the hope of not only being treated with respect but also feeling better about themselves. Creative ways of negotiating local poverty and the ways in which residents go about trying to gain respect may change over time. In spite of this, the desire to be acknowledged as deserving of respect is sure to remain as long as prevailing notions continue to mark poor black women in urban settings as unworthy.

If more resources and legitimate businesses were to enter the community, the presence of poverty and systemic inequality
would still persist, further complicating the lives of women who live there. The women who live in East Oakland under impoverished conditions and experience the stigma attached to living in poverty often envision much of their own struggle playing out in the lives of their children. As this tragic legacy is passed on, so must traditions of managing such lived realities. Keeping it fresh can operate as a tradition that children grow up with. It is a strategy that can be adjusted as necessary, but is fundamentally designed to help them use available material resources in such a way that challenges common expectations that complicate their encounters with others.