

## Poetry of Desire: Teenage Girls Challenge the “Dilemma” and Write about Sexuality

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This article explores the disconnect between academic, interview-based research with adolescents and the actual lived experiences of teenagers. I advocate that through long-term relationships, community partnerships, creating safe and creative spaces and empowering youth to understand and make meaning of their own experiences, we can truly begin to investigate the issues relevant to their lives. Through personal reflection and analysis of the words and experiences of girls who participated in a performing arts program, I propose creative ways to invite silenced voices into the research process beyond interviews and surveys.

*...Kisses so sweet even the coldest heart could be heated  
It was like he gave me a reason to be conceited  
Then one day, things changed  
And it felt like they would never be the same  
Reality hit hard, I should've seen the signs comin  
Cuz for once, it wasn't towards his love I was runnin  
His touch became cold as he went deeper, me not ready  
A relationship so solid then became unsteady... (Naima)*

**H**ow do we understand how teenage girls experience sexuality today? Research questions are broadly asked by investigators, researchers, and graduate students with structures such as: “How do adolescent girls make decisions about sex? How do they experience desire? To what extent do they express sexual agency?” Methods erupt from the questions, and doctoral students in the social sciences are trained to choose quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews among other modes of inquiry. Images are burned into minds: a lone researcher in an interrogation room asking questions, recording answers, logging observations, analyzing data then writing up her or his findings. In my experience, there seems to be a disconnect from the actual experiences of the teenagers and the printed words of academic papers read by scholars, policymakers, and students. Once the interview is over and the voice captured on tape, the teenager is often shut out of the rest of the process. I am discovering that it is through long-term relationships, community partnerships, creating safe and creative spaces and empowering youth to understand and make meaning of their own experiences that we can truly begin to investigate the issues relevant to their lives. In order to challenge inequalities, shift community perceptions and inspire positive social change, *research* must be rethought and restructured to invite the silenced voices into the process beyond interviews and surveys. In just listening to the words that girls tell us in interviews, we shut out what is often the most passionate, heartfelt and honest expressions that they have—those constructed through creative expression.

The focus of this paper contrasts teenage girls’ explorations of sexuality through a creative community-based, theatermaking process with academic research in the burgeoning field of girls’ studies. Beginning with Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan’s

studies (*Meetings*), research in psychology and education as well as popular works by Mary Pipher and Peggy Orenstein erupted with focused studies of girls and their unique experiences. The American Association of University Women's study, *How Schools Shortchange Girls* added timbers to the flames of this body of work that succeeded in showing evidence for links between girls' self esteem, achievement and career aspirations. As a multi-disciplinary field, girls' studies borrows methods from its sister fields of psychology, women's studies and education. Because of its commitment to understanding the needs and experiences of actual girls, the field relies heavily on interviews and quantitative surveys to collect data. But due to the specific circumstances and systemic challenges girls deal with in their everyday lives, I see their outward hunger to create a unique identity and celebrate their individuality clash with their desire to maintain relationships and please others. Confronted with the eager questions from adult researchers, girls' direct responses need to be challenged at a deeper level. Throughout the past decade of my work with teenage girls, I have been developing an arts-based research methodology to best engage with girls and understand their lives and their experiences of sexuality—by listening to their creative voices.

I will problematize the assumed faith that qualitative interviews are the “best” measures for understanding girls' experiences of sexuality. By comparing poetic texts that girls created within the security of a trusting, collaborative arts environment, I argue that it is through analyzing the work created in community spaces that we can actually come to deeper understandings about core, sensitive issues related to girls and sexuality.

In examining teenagers and sexuality, an early journey is usually to look at the schools (Levine). Sex education has been shrunk, folded up, twisted in circles and turned upside down for New York City's public high school students. Controlling the way sexuality education is taught in public schools is clearly a political issue more than a pedagogical one. It struck me that the larger issue emerging was not about birth control, New York City's mandated “abstinence only” curriculum, or sexuality education, but it was about how teenage girls perceive the act of sex, their relationship to their bodies and to the boys and girls in their lives. The school system's response is to wrap a gauze bandage around the problem, suffocating and silencing the real stories that are bleeding beneath. Curriculum was developed by professional adults and censored by political motives and conservative trends.

“The adolescent woman of the 1980s is... educated primarily as the potential victim of male sexuality, she represents no subject in her own right” (Fine 39). In her influential study, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” Michelle Fine exposes the missing pages from the New York City sex education curriculum. Through classroom observations, interviews and curriculum analysis, Fine was among the first researchers to notice the danger and inadequacy of New York City sex education as it relates to girls' sexuality. With its scare tactics and focus on violence, AIDS, victimization, rape, morality, and abstinence, sexuality is villainized as evil. “...[I]n the typical sex education classroom, silence, and therefore distortion, surrounds female desire” (45). She describes the disabling of girls' agency through its absence. Her study is rich with energized debate about the sexist and misogynist culture that denies

girls the space, freedom or respect to speak about their desire. Dotted throughout her text are quotations from her classroom interviews with girls that she refers to as evidence for her theories. Methodologically, she attempts to challenge girls' silence by voicing their stories.

But how does Fine, an academic researcher, plow her field of research to allow the space for her theories to bloom? How do her readers trust her argument that desire is excluded not because it is not there but because it is suppressed? She passionately and thoroughly uses feminist theory to support her hypotheses and contextualizes her question within the political climate of the day. But her interview texts are sparse. The voice that shouts the strongest to defend her theory is Shandra, 17, who skips her interview with Fine by telling her later, "my boyfriend came back from [the] Navy and I wanted to spend the night with him, we don't get to see each other much" (44). As evidence for Shandra's expression of sexual desire, this quote teeters on shaky grounds. There is an implicit assumption on Fine's part that Shandra's "wanting" to spend the night with her boyfriend implies sexual agency. Might Shandra have wanted to simply "see" him? Or perhaps he had forced her to be with him, against her will. Or maybe she felt pressured to show him that she was waiting for him. Deborah L. Tolman, whose body of work exploring girls' sexuality begins where Fine's study leaves off, writes about Shandra's quote in "Adolescent Girls, Women and Sexuality: Discerning Dilemmas of Desire": "this reference to desire is almost like a code; it is hard to pick up unless one has a key" (62).

Through her work over the next decade and a half, Tolman not only wields the key, but also builds the entire house where research about girls' sexual desire awakens. In 1991, Tolman declares "[t]here has been no research by psychologists on female adolescent sexual desire" ("Adolescent Girls" 58). She fills this gap immediately as she challenges the silences surrounding girls' desire. Beginning with an outline of the feminist historical context of female desire, Tolman writes about girls' needs to "conceive of themselves as sexual subjects" (59). Her mid-1990's studies analyze the intensive interviews she conducted with urban and suburban teenage girls about their experiences of sexual desire. She identifies the focus of her 1994 article, "Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls' Struggles for/with Sexuality" as "how girls' social environments shape their understanding of their sexuality" (326). This specific articulation exposes Tolman's assumptions and predictions for the following twenty years of her research. The statement implies that girls' social environments *do* shape their understanding of their sexuality. It predicts her future research that investigates, through various qualitative and quantitative methods, how precisely she can identify the extent to which social factors do affect girls' perceptions of sexuality. The next assumption embedded in this phrase is that girls *can* have a conscious and articulable understanding of their sexuality. She assumes that sexuality is a part of a girl's identity that can be examined, isolated and understood as separate from other parts of herself. She assumes that she can simply ask a girl about sex, and get a clear answer.

Tolman's most comprehensive work exploring teenage girls and sexuality is her 2002 book, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality*, a groundbreaking text that showcases the individual stories, narratives, and voices of teenage girls from urban

and suburban high schools in the Northeastern United States. She identifies recurring themes of girls silencing their sexual desire in various aspects of their lives and the poisons that can ferment when trapped beneath the surface. Her book is a detailed and defended call for safe spaces where girls can explore issues of sexual desire.

Undeniably, Tolman's contributions have had an astounding impact on the field of girls' sexual development. She has expanded the knowledge and significance of girls' desire in relation to sexuality studies to great proportions. However, most of her research and writing (1991, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2002) comes out of the one-on-one interviews she conducted with twenty-nine girls at an urban and suburban high school in 1991. Because she sets up so forcefully the veils of silence surrounding girls' desire, I question whether opening this curtain through interviewing girls is the most valuable method. Teenage girls have worked hard (for centuries!) to keep these stories inside. Speaking to an adult, a psychologist no less, might force the girls into a space where they are aware they are being judged, analyzed, and possibly criticized for their thoughts or behaviors.

With such careful focus on each word of the interviews and detailed attention to how the girls are speaking about themselves and about their desire, I trust that Tolman has authentically responded to the concern, "how do I know that these girls did not, in essence, lie or make up their answers?" (*Dilemmas* 40). Her studies look at how girls are experiencing and expressing desire. It is not crucial whether "it happened" exactly the way the girls describe their sexual experiences and feelings. Tolman's research is interested in "the complexity of the experiences they describe [that] lend their stories credibility" (40).

But still, Tolman's study is challenged by a too-common limitation of many psychological studies. She can only record and analyze the stories of the girls who have chosen to speak with her. Only half the girls asked to be in the study participated (*Dilemmas* 219). Why might the other half have turned away her request? She reveals, "while some of [the girls who *agreed* to participate] would not talk to me about [sexual desire], the majority were eager" (192). So whose experiences exactly is this study looking at? What was—and wasn't—happening during Tolman's interviews? I look forward to a future where talking about sexuality and sexual experiences isn't a source of shame, awkwardness, vulnerability and regret for teenage girls, but the reality is that factors such as peer pressure, religion, cultural beliefs, law, family, and dominant and misogynist media representations all contribute to shutting girls up when sex is brought up. How might researchers expand the methodological framework of girls' sexuality studies to include voices of girls who might not sign up to participate in "this little research thing" as one of them called it" (ix) or to create different experiences of an "interview" in order to encourage a broader media of responses? How can we learn about girls' desire without needing to ask them directly?

"Sitting in an out-of-the-way, sun-filled corner of a seldom used corridor" (Tolman, *Dilemmas* 1), and "using a semi-structured clinical interview" (Tolman & Debold 303), are a few of the descriptions of Tolman's methods of collecting girls' desire narratives. Because of the deeply personal and sensitive nature of the interview content, I

read the text of the girls' responses with an occasional cloud of skepticism. I imagine Inez, Tolman's 17-year-old participant in the hallway of her urban school. Tolman's description is that this corridor is "*seldom* used," not "*never* used." I imagine Inez with a yellow caution light reflected in her eyes as she speaks, aware that at any moment, someone might interrupt or overhear. Tolman later establishes that the girls at the urban school were mistrustful of each other and ferociously fearful of other girls hearing and spreading their stories, soiling their reputations, "so fearful were they of saying something about themselves that could be used against them" (*Dilemmas* 33). So much of Tolman's analysis and discussion calls for a "safe space" (38, 40; 199) for girls to discuss sexual desire. What constitutes "safe"? Is it freedom from the danger of being judged in that moment by an adult, or by her peers? I believe this is a core necessity for girls to feel they can express themselves and speak honestly, and I challenge Tolman's ability as an independent researcher to construct this environment with girls that she meets one time.

In my work creating original theater with girls in the community, I would never assume that on the first rehearsal, enough trust could be built for girls to open up and speak freely and expansively about their intimate life experiences. Researchers can learn from community artists how to establish a safe space in which sensitive and personal issues can breathe freely. A few strategies we use to build trust within our ensembles include working together and taking risks to achieve collective success through physical endeavors and writing and sharing personal and collaborative stories anonymously until individuals feel safe that their ideas and experiences will not be mocked or invalidated. We also encourage girls to create characters to talk through as masks that protect their vulnerability from each other and the audience. Through sharing personal stories in creative forms—writing poetry, making dances, and devising songs—girls articulate their emotions and experiences through misty veils coating iron skeletons. They can talk in spirals around an issue without feeling pressured to expose the center. These creative lenses serve to push the stories out and into the playmaking space, protected. Though as is often the case, once the text is written and the lines are memorized, the masks slip down to expose the shining eyes and strong, unaltered voices behind them.

"They do not talk spontaneously about their own desire," Tolman notes as part of the need to directly question girls in her interviews (*Dilemmas* 25). Prior research (Dodson, 1998; Martin, 1996; Thompson, 1995) "suggests that it is unlikely that girls themselves will raise the taboo topic of sexual desire unless specifically asked" (Tolman, *Dilemmas* 26). Ellen is "clearly wary of me and my questions" (83). "[I]t is possible that talking about their sexuality was such a new experience that the words were simply hard to find" (37). Why have girls been so quiet?

In *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*, Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown penetrated the silence of girls by poking deeply into what holds their tongues and why. "Girls develop a sharp eye and ear for the disparity between what people say and what is really going on. But underneath there is a deeper and more confusing split: not between appearance and reality but between their experience and reality as it is generally constructed by other people" (*Meeting* 170). This work outlines a

crisis in adolescence for girls when they slice a chasm between what they know—and what they feel they can express. Girls fear that speaking their truths could lead to broken relationships and they begin to question what they know. They can speak out and risk getting in trouble or they can keep quiet and risk disappearing. They withdraw into silence.

[Angela] said she ‘never really talks about sexuality’ and feels it is a ‘touchy subject’.... Amy...did not look me in the eye [and] offered one-word answers.... Honore... thought I ‘must be a pervert’ to want to know the answers to such questions... Beverly[‘s]...responses were extraordinarily sparse... it is likely that these girls did not trust me. It is possible that sexual desire is not a part of their lived experience. It is possible that these girls were shy, not ‘big talkers’ in general. It is possible that talking about their sexuality was such a new experience that the words were simply hard to find (*Dilemma* 37).

I am interested in Tolman’s final consideration that “the words were simply hard to find.” Because her questions invite the girls to think “bodily” about desire, the structure of Tolman’s method demands attention to space and body. She asks the girls to talk about where and how desire lives in their body. She asks as she sits across from them, next to them, hunched over in secrecy with them, tape recorder “whirling” (*Dilemma* 1). Alive and present in the moment of the interview, breathing in the smells and sounds of the school: wet paint, furnaces squeaking, hallway screaming, teenage sweat, bells ringing, PA systems buzzing... cannot help but stretch like skin over the girls as they attempt to recall feelings of lust, joy, fear, insecurity, regret, love and desire. Tolman reflects upon the limits of the metaphorical spaces between the girls and herself—the age, race and professional distance—but she never refers to this obvious physical distance, or *lack* of distance. Because her process is locked in a slice of time and a corridor of space, her findings share the same constraints. I am unsettled by the pressure of the immediacy and improvisational demands of these interviews. The girls are expected to answer spontaneously, authentically and emotionally to a series of questions asked by a stranger about their intimate experiences, experiences that are often stained with excitement, shame, embarrassment, insecurity, pride and countless other weighted feelings.

Through Laura’s story, Tolman illuminates a situation where a girl seems to struggle to find words to express her remembered emotions. Her theories and analyses grow out of these word choices, struggles and silences that the girls make and their experience of telling the stories. According to Tolman, Laura’s inability to articulate her feelings means that she must not have felt sexual desire. After careful prodding:

D: What did it feel like? How did you feel around this guy?

L: I don’t know, jumpy I guess.

D: Yeah?

L: I just felt jumpy.

D: Did it feel good?

L: Yeah, you could say that yeah. It felt strange, I know that... It’s like I was all jumpy and stuff, like I was takin’ drugs or something [laughs]... I guess you could say it was a sexual feeling, you feel it all over (Tolman, *Dilemma* 69).

Tolman's analysis is that "while she is describing some kind of arousal, there is no indication that it has a sexual quality" (69). By reading into this transcript, however, it seems that Tolman's need to prod Laura shows Laura's challenge in expressing her feelings in a language Tolman could understand. Tolman interrupts Laura's silence after each thought with a further question or validation ("yeah?"). She explains her interviewing style as: "when asked in a straightforward and safe way about their own sexual desire, what do adolescent girls say?" (23). Laura's leap to metaphor implies that a creative approach might have been more effective in guiding her to recall her feelings. Thinking directly *at* a situation can be blinding, like looking at the sun. Sometimes to see how bright the sun is you need to look at what it is illuminating. Laura was unable to stare *at* her desire, though by grasping at metaphors such as feeling "jumpy" or "like I was takin' drugs" helps her to express the actual feeling and possibly confirm that it was sexual.

As a writer, Tolman beautifully weaves metaphor and rich imagery into her text. She describes that in the girls' neighborhoods, "violence was in the air they breathed" (*Dilemma* 183) and she describes her shift in analysis "like twisting a kaleidoscope so that the pieces fall into another pattern" (168). An assumption so obvious that it is often overlooked about the field of research is the power that an idea, theory or concept has once it is written and published. It is through written words and linked images, phrases and paragraphs that we read stories, imagine narratives and construct understanding. In order to communicate her findings and theories, Tolman does not choreograph a dance or paint a picture, she writes a book. She sifts through her ideas, recordings, memories and notes and layers words on pages to construct meaning. There is a certain safety, temporary anonymity and freedom in the written word. The writer is not facing her reader/audience in the moment. She has the pre-meditated time and space to remember, to think thoroughly, to embody her fantasies and desire, craft her story, explore her voice, and construct her metaphors. The second half of this paper proposes as research data creative writing by two teenage girls about sexuality.

It's often at this point that I take off my "academic researcher" hat, let my purple streaked hair loose and engage with the teenage girls in my theater company as a collaborating artist and director. I am the Co-founder and Executive Director of viBe Theater Experience (viBe), a community-based, performing arts organization that empowers underserved teenage girls in New York City to write and perform original theater and music. Since 2002, viBe has produced more than 35 new theater performances, 4 CDs of original music, 6 arts-based resource guidebooks and has provided the space for more than 125 girls to explore identity and social justice issues through collaborative performance. Because I have been spending the past decade of my life listening to girls sing, reading the poetry scratched on torn notebook pages, and guiding them to make dances that express what they need to communicate to their community, I find myself reading adolescent theory with a tensely raised eyebrow. I've thrown academic journals across the room when I've read about theories mined from an hour of interview tape recorded by an adult stranger poking questions at a squirming teenager. I'm interested in how we understand the ways adolescent girls experience their world and have learned that we're not going to find answers simply by asking them questions. As an artist, I am

attuned to the impulse to create. When rage, pain, ecstasy, depression and fear trespass through me, I reroute and recharge through splatters of paint on a canvas or trails of word juice soaking a page. Creativity lives in that space between analysis and tears, between thought and desire.

Drama researcher Cecily O'Neill says in an interview with John O'Toole, "the seeker for *dramatic truth* approaches the source material looking for resonances that can be verified internally, implicitly, even subliminally..." (O'Toole 152). As a reader/researcher, I can openly express my awe at the courage and hunger young writers have to express their stories. I can reflect authentically in the moment and allow for any instinctual, possibly damaging, physical reactions such as shock, confusion or amusement. The girls will finish their story without seeing or hearing my gasps or widening eyes. I listen to their voices by reading the zigzagging text in their notebooks. I can ask follow-up questions later. I can wonder about the "truth" versus their "creative license" in the rhyming couplets of poetry, though as Tolman alludes to, "worrying about the extent to which these reports mirror reality misses the point" (*Dilemma* 40). "The point" is that girls have been silencing the whispers of desire from their pens, their throats and the rest of their bodies. "The point" is that so much of the decades of research about adolescent girls holds them hostage as "the potential victim[s] of male sexuality, [representing] no subject in [their] own right" (Fine 39). I am most intrigued by the stories that they choose to weave and the poetry they spit. Their "desires" pulse through their texts. Whether fueled by memory or fantasy, these are still buried narratives.

In direct contrast to Tolman's observations that girls do not spontaneously talk about sexual desire, I have found that often, when given the space and supplies to *write* and to *perform*, girls will reflect, fantasize and obsess about it. In the safety of their solitude, with the only sound their pens scratching across the page, girls tell their experiences of sexuality, their stories of shame, pain, discovery and desire. As examples, I will share two pieces of creative writing by girls from viBe Theater Experience in New York City. I will analyze them next to Tolman's interview texts, investigating how creative writing and performance might illuminate similar and different aspects of girls' sexuality and contribute to a deeper understanding of girls' sexuality development as it relates to the "dilemma of desire." As I read through poetry, plays and songs; as I scrolled through my memory of performances, rehearsals and workshops; as I spoke with girls who I've been collaborating with for six months, two years, four years, I notice that the data piles to a tipping point. Different from the texts of interviews, this "data" sings like music layered through time. This data pulses with a different kind of energy altogether. These stories were farmed over time, in spaces far away from research laboratories. These stories were first whispered across circles of girls sitting centerstage on painted wood floors. By inviting girls to weave their experiences through metaphor, poetry and performed texts, their experiences, thoughts and emotions literally come to life on stage. As a direct challenge to interview studies conducted by academic researchers with no prior relationship to the youth they are "researching," I advocate for recognizing the work created in community-based arts organizations as vital to our understanding of adolescents' experiences.



Naima, a 15-year-old, shy Muslim girl of African descent fills notebooks with poetry, writing about identity struggles, sex and boys.<sup>1</sup> Her headscarf is usually a bright Crayola color that matches her tee shirt and sneakers. In reading her poem about her first sexual experiences, her uses of metaphors and her pre-meditated construction of the journey of her story provide a more clear, articulated expression of her emotional and sexual desires and fears than found in many of Tolman's interviews. [See poem in sidebar].

Though in no way comparing her experiences to Tolman's "Laura," I am struck by Naima's use of metaphors as descriptors of her feelings. When she writes, "kisses so sweet/ even the coldest heart could be heated/ It was like he gave me a reason to be conceited" (l. 7-8), the metaphors breath life into the emotional content and construction of her narrative. She uses words as sensory images to signpost her storytelling announcing the turns and twists along her way. As opposed to an interview transcript where all the reader has is the text and the interpretation from the interviewer (and other readers according the Listening Guide method), the poem can stand alone as the girl's contained response. She intentionally constructs, revises, rewrites and completes the beginning, middle and end. Through rehearsals, she digs deeper into the text, into her emotional rainbow of vocabulary, choosing specific words and beats and gestures to communicate in three dimensions. In performance, her voice, rhythm and physicality all contribute to add more detail and breadth to her narrative. The heightened language becomes the emotional rhythm that is so challenging to record in an interview. Tone is embedded in the words. "Kisses so sweet" captures the sensual experience of touch and taste without the awkward questioning from the interviewer. "Even the coldest heart could be heated" expresses an energy and coloring beyond vague phrases like "I loved him."

His touch became cold as he went deeper, me not ready  
A relationship so solid then became unsteady  
"it's OK, I love you, and you love me" he said  
Well, if you loved me you'd know my brain feels like it's dead  
But I went on with it cuz curiosity came over me  
Trying to see the person I used to love to see  
Pretending a touch so cold really brought joy  
Trying to believe that I wasn't just his toy (l. 15-20)

This story might have been challenging to tell to an interviewer in a classroom in a school, looking her in the eye and listening deeply. Because the structure of her poem demands brevity of detail to match the rhymes, Naima must be clearly succinct and with each event of storytelling, saturating action with emotion. "Well, if you loved me you'd know my brain feels like it's dead," she writes. This line, without quotes, is meant to be read as her inner thought's response to his self-absorbed statement of love. And even though her brain feels dead, she "[goes] on with it." Tolman writes about Inez's body as "present yet not feeling; a self that is not there, that does not act but is acted upon..." (*Dilemmas* 22). Through her poetic reflection, Naima not only describes her body's betrayal, but layers the boy's voice in. Through deeper literary analysis, I notice that the boy's voice is not part of the rhyme, his words fall within the line, not at the end. This implies that Naima, as the writer and the storyteller, has more control over his voice in

her retelling of the story. He is an embedded part of her narrative, warning the ending when his power overtakes her sexually.

“And as the slow song suddenly became fast he entered my body/ Pain being brought hoping it would end eventually” (Naima l. 25-26). This couplet stands out from the poem because the rhyme and the meter are both off. The lines have a different number of syllables, and “body” only loosely rhymes with “eventually.” These lines are also the most charged narratively as they contain the violent action of the story and the boy’s forceful penetration. Naima dissociates from this part of the experience by switching to the passive voice, “Pain being brought.” The rhythm changes, the slow song becomes fast, but also the long line leads into a short line, signifying an abrupt shift in tone as well. This method of close analysis of Naima’s text yields a wealth of data and information about her feelings, desires and fears. Because the piece was created within the boundaries of a protected and creative space, she can explore the story by talking *at* it. The poem rises to the surface, like skimmed cream, and can be examined by both Naima, the researcher/director and the other girls in the room who might identify with its arc. Devised and edited through collaboration with other teenage girls, the story demands further clarity as girls comment, identify, challenge and support Naima’s experience and articulation.

“Asked to describe the circumstances of first coitus, many girls blink and freeze... ‘it was something that just happened’ they say finally. They don’t know how it happened” (Thompson, “Putting” 343). If asked about this experience directly, Naima might have just “blinked and froze” but with the space to think through “how it happened,” she provides a denser narrative that allows for a deeper understanding of her experience. Later, Naima tells me, “I felt like when I first lost my virginity I didn’t, um, I didn’t express as much emotion as I should’ve according to what people would say and it kinda didn’t *get* to me as much as I thought it would but I realized that after I started writing it, a lot of more emotions came out that I didn’t know were there and I actually am happy that I wrote it just cuz of that.”

“We create an impossible situation for girls: Healthy sexuality means having sexual desire, but there is little if any safe space—physically, socially, psychologically—for these forbidden and dangerous feelings” (Tolman, *Dilemmas* 22). The other example, from a solo performance piece, explodes this assumption that there are no safe spaces for girls to explore sexual desire. [See poem in sidebar]. 17-year-old Genna, a tall African American teenager with long burgundy dreadlocks, writes explicitly and erotically about her thirst for sex with women.<sup>2</sup> This piece also challenges the silence surrounding girls’ desire as it was written and performed as a solo show in the spring of 2006 called *THIRSTY*. The full text of the play included a dozen characters, girls and women who speak honestly, boldly and shamelessly about their sex lives.

I wanna smile like those people on TV  
Who demonstrate what the outcome could be  
If one perfectly were to seduce, have foreplay, then sex  
In a maximum of 5 minutes or less  
In real life that’s nothing to brag about

But if you could make me climax within that time span  
Do more than most could do if they had all night (Genna l. 24-30)

Genna's text pulses with the energy of desire. She satirizes the ridiculous ways the media portrays sex and demands pleasure for herself, challenging the "you" she is speaking to. She uses humor and metaphor, writes boldly about her identity as a lesbian and mocks anyone who stands in her way of fulfilling her desires. Her poem, written in private, workshopped and edited in collaboration, was performed live for hundreds of audience members.

That just made my throat dry  
My palms sweat  
I don't know it's been a while  
But I think I might be wet  
And you all might be wondering  
What my point may be  
I honestly, just want to know  
If anyone has a glass of water  
'Cuz I'm really thirsty. (l. 34-42)

Genna's words embody her hunger and provide a visceral context for where her desire lives in her body. She uses the literal and metaphoric physical responses of dryness and wetness, nearly universal biological expressions of female desire that never occur (or aren't written about) in any of the girls' interviews with Tolman. The parameters of poetry and performance beg Genna to invent language and images that allow her to express her story in her unique voice. "There are three factors in the making of art which are directly relevant to the making of research: the *discipline of form*, the *operation of intuition*, and the *social making of meaning*" (O'Toole 150-151). She represents a refreshing future where girls are forging their own paths, lined with stories, poetry and drama that challenge the assumptions of silence and passivity by speaking about their desire and demanding to be heard.

Another example of a teenage girl challenging the assumptions that girls rarely speak of desire, that girls are submissive or silenced in relation to boys, and that girls rarely assert themselves sexually or ask for they want, is Diamond's song, "411."<sup>3</sup> This sixteen-year-old songstress releases an aggressive and bold song about her lead up to pursuing a boy whom she sees on the subway. [Link to mp3]. Listening to her voice, one can hear the energy, clarity and force of her want as she wails:

I've been watching you for awhile  
I did the way you dress with your sexy smile  
I see you with you with your boys and I turn away  
Cuz baby truly speakin, I don't know what to say  
I try to talk to you and get your name  
I'm hopin that you're single and you feel the same  
So, honey, come on over and let me know  
What we gonna do cuz I'm feelin your flow

[chorus]  
Baby, what's the 411  
Baby, can I get to know you better  
Baby, what's the 411  
Baby, can you let me know your name  
Baby, what's the 411  
Cuz you got me feelin kind of open, yeah

I know it's now or never so here I go  
I'm hopin that you want me so let me know  
The pressure's comin on so don't turn away  
Listen to me now, I've got something to say  
I've been lookin from a distance now, let's zoom on in  
I'm likin what I see, what do you think of me  
I want to get to know you so let me know  
I can't wait any longer, if you're mine, let's go<sup>4</sup>

On its surface, this song might feel like a bubblegum pop song about a teenage crush, but through a deeper, literary and vocal analysis, it tells a story of desire. It's an interesting build from Diamond's more shy beginning when she's watching the boy and trying to get the courage to speak with him. But then when the chorus kicks in, we hear multiple voices and feel the energy of her friends, their support and encouragement. She lets their voices push her forward and give her new strength, "I know it's now or never so here I go/ I'm hopin that you want me so let me know." She uses language of lust: "want," "can't wait," "you're mine" and "let's go." The seemingly "innocent" narrative actually tells a story of a girl building strength through the support and confidence from her girlfriends to approach and seduce a stranger whom she is attracted to. Listening to the music as research data conveys the energy, the spirit of her excitement, and her desire in ways that interview transcripts or written field notes cannot. If we as researchers truly want to "share the voices of our participants," technology has finally caught up and allowed us the space to include their breaths, notes, vowels and throaty wails as evidence. I have read, watched and heard girls express bold and unabashed sexuality in poetic texts and songs created for themselves, for audiences, for friends, parents, teachers and strangers in a way that I have not heard them speak on the street, in classrooms or in clinical interviews. These girls challenge our cultural discourse that seems to worship stories such as *The Little Mermaid* where girls are forced to trade their voice for their survival. Throughout Tolman's studies, she quantitatively identifies that barely 2/3 of the girls (who have chosen to be) in her studies are speaking to her about their sexual desire ("Doing"). Her later survey studies reveal that girls who have "positive sexual self-concepts" report "greater feelings of passionate love and more extensive romantic relationship histories... and lower levels of negative affect such as sexual anxiety" (Impett and Tolman 630). By equating these outcomes (love and romantic history) as "positive," Tolman reveals her bias that leans towards an assumption that it is healthiest—for girls and for society that they feel good and empowered about their sexual identity.

“If girls know their desire, what else might they begin to know about themselves and their situation in the culture?” (Tolman, “Adolescent” 67). Throughout her body of work, she equates knowledge with strength and power, and advocates not for an increase in sexual experiences by girls, but for an increase in safe spaces where girls can explore their sexual feelings vocally as well as physically, and a social validation that their desire *is* healthy. In *Sister/ Outsider*, Audre Lorde writes, “we have been raised to fear the *yes* within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance” (157-8). By recognizing, validating, publishing and producing more stories of girls’ yesses, as well as their nos and maybes, we can “demand, ensure and protect girls’ right to feel and act upon their own sexual feelings without having to be encumbered by unfair and unnecessary dilemmas of desire” (*Dilemmas* 206).

Unfortunately, though my confidence as a researcher is validated by the depth of the stories and experiences the girls write/perform about, I am suffocated by the dusty restrictions my university boxes around qualitative research. As I have outlined earlier, it is in the trust and intimacy of my work with the girls throughout creative processes that allows me, as a researcher, to mine their texts for new theories about adolescent sexuality. The university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), however, chooses to see my dual relationship of researcher/ director with the girls as coercive and problematic. All my attempts thus far to challenge the IRB to recognize that it is these very dualistic roles that illuminate the positive implications for future research, have failed. Again and again, my proposals for research with “human subjects” were returned with comments that, because I was working with the girls as their director, I held power over them and was in some way coercing them to participate in my research studies. In accordance with the IRB, I have been forced to shift my research designs to avoid actively “doing my research” while I work with the girls day to day. Instead, I can only interview them *after* the programs are over and analyze their writing and performance, with their consent, following the final performance. This stifles my ability to talk to the girls throughout their writing process and attempt to understand their choices, revisions and reactions to their creative expressions as they are evolving.

As the gates around the field of research start to loosen their locks to let in some fresh air, I’m ready for the day when I can pass through effortlessly, balancing both my hats. Within my slivered discipline of girls’ studies in general and sexuality and performance studies specifically, I notice how necessary it is to keep the gate open. The academic community of researchers, interviewers and scholars needs to peek outside more and usher in the folks who are working deeply and creatively in the backyard. I seesaw in both worlds as I spend my days running a non-profit organization empowering urban teenage girls and my nights sequestered in the library, reading tomes of research and history to help illuminate and allow me to make meaning from the stories I hear in the theater.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “Naima” is a self-selected pseudonym. When I considered writing about her, I approached her and described the research project, the need for her voice and poem to be included and asked for her feedback in regards to the ways I represented her. She was enthusiastic about being involved and I shared the completed article with her. Her positive feedback validated my thesis that research needs to include more collaborations between researcher and participant.

<sup>2</sup> Genna, now 20 years old, preferred that I use her real name as her play, *THIRSTY*, has been produced in a New York City solo theater festival under her name as the playwright/ performer.

<sup>3</sup> “Diamond,” a member participant of viBe Theater Experience for all four years of high school and now a college student, has consistently returned to support our work and grant permission to use her stories, songs, text, opinions and writings for research, fundraising and marketing purposes to help empower other teenage girls through the arts.

<sup>4</sup> “411” from viBeSongMakers Volume One: *HOTFiRE!- Finally Someone Hears Us*. copyright viBe Theater Experience, 2005.

Deleted: was

## Side Bars:

### Naima

1- It started off with this beautiful smile  
2- Seen it once could drive me wild  
3- Led to conversations filled with warmth & joy  
4- I never knew such happiness could be brought by this one boy  
5- Time went by and emotions grew more and more  
6- It was like he shut the door of stress and opened happiness' door  
7- Kisses so sweet even the coldest heart could be heated  
8- It was like he gave me a reason to be conceited  
9- He left me feelin happy for days  
10- Satisfaction brought in numerous ways  
11- Then one day, things changed  
12- And it felt like they would never be the same  
13- Reality hit hard, I should've seen the signs comin  
14- Cuz for once, it wasn't towards his love I was runnin  
15- His touch became cold as he went deeper, me not ready  
16- A relationship so solid then became unsteady  
17- "its OK, I love you, and you love me" he said  
18- Well, if you loved me you'd know my brain feels like its dead  
19- But I went on with it cuz curiosity came over me  
20- Trying to see the person I used to love to see  
21- Pretending a touch so cold really brought joy  
22- Trying to believe that I wasn't just his toy  
23- Imagining so hard that we still shared a feeling called love  
24- Praying that eventually the emotions would take me above  
25- And as the slow song suddenly became fast he entered my body  
26- Pain being brought hoping it would end eventually  
27- And when it did, all I wanted to do was cry  
28- How could he let the love inside me die?  
29- He put my emotions and feelings for him to the test  
30- Just to experience this short feeling called sex

### Genna

1- I've walked across  
2- This desert for days  
3- Caught up in mindless sex  
4- With my comfort zone  
5- With my ex  
6- Who hands had yet  
7- To figure out my pleasure zones  
8- It seems as though  
9- She may never know  
10- What to do  
11- To make me scream truthfully  
12- To stop me from pretending  
13- In order to take me there  
14- Take me where?  
15- You know  
16- That place where my body feels numb  
17- But its still riding that wave  
18- Like Mariah would say  
19- Ooh, baby  
20- It's more tragic than a Shakespearean drama  
21- The unfortunate nature of my sex life  
22- The fact that my throat is parched  
23- My body is dehydrated  
24- I wanna smile like those people on TV  
25- Who demonstrate what the outcome could be  
26- If one perfectly were to seduce, have foreplay, then sex  
27- In a maximum of 5 minutes or less  
28- In real life that's nothing to brag about  
29- But if you could make me climax within that time span  
30- Do more than most could do if they had all night  
31- Then I would get down on my knees  
32- And perform...  
33- [parental advisory explicit content right here]  
34- That just made my throat dry  
35- My palms sweat  
36- I don't know it's been a while  
37- But I think I might be wet  
38- And you all might be wondering  
39- What my point may be  
40- I honestly, just want to know  
41- If anyone has a glass of water  
42- 'Cuz I'm really thirsty.

NOTE: There is also an mp3 that goes with this piece.

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