

# 1 / The Anatomy of a Movement

On Friday, March 20, 1998, the *Philadelphia Daily News* published an article that would dramatically change the lives of many black women. Written by Marisol Bello and titled “Shape Up, Sisters!” the article offered an extensive portrait of Melanie Marchand, a local fitness professional, and one of her clients, Denise Murphy, who had gone from a size 16 to a size 8 over the course of the previous year and a half. For her article, Bello shadowed Melanie and Denise through one of their typical training sessions, interviewed both of them, and described Melanie’s program of weight training, aerobic exercise, and nutrition education in the context of addressing the health problems black women face as a group, including disproportionately high rates of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. Subtitled “52% of Black Women Overweight,” the article caught people’s attention. Not only did it offer a snapshot of black women’s negative health indicators relative to those of women of other racial and ethnic groups but it also succeeded in capturing Denise’s enthusiasm for her lifestyle changes and Melanie’s commitment to improving black women’s health. At the end of the article, Bello included a short sentence that set everything in motion: “For more information, contact Sisters in Shape.”

That day alone, more than one hundred women called Sisters in Shape. More continued to call over the next few days. All told, between two and three hundred women called Sisters in Shape in the week following the article, and the tone of their messages ranged from despair to hope, from anger to motivation. In one of our first interviews, Melanie recalled some of the messages:

One woman called [*raises voice slightly*], “I’m three hundred pounds; I’m overweight; I need help; please help me.” Another woman [said], “Hi, my name is so-and-so, and I wanna get more information about Sisters in Shape. I’m ready to make a change. I want a new *me*,” and she was all excited: “I want a new *me*” [*repeated with attitude*]. And then you have this other woman who calls and sa[ys], “Hi, my name is so-and-so and me and about five other women here at such-and-such middle school are out of shape and overweight. Please call.” It was just really inspiring to hear the hope, the optimism that they had in their voices because they felt like they had found some answer to something that they need help with.

When the calls started, Sisters in Shape was little more than a voice-mail box for three black women who worked as fitness instructors in the city and who performed together as part of the 12th Street Gym aerobics demonstration team. On the basis of their own life experiences and evidence from their classes at a number of gyms in the greater Philadelphia area, Melanie, Kathy Tillery, and Carethia Thomas believed that African American women generally tend not to prioritize exercise and fitness in their lives. Drawing on their collective knowledge, their many years of experience in the exercise and fitness industry, and their status as fitness role models, the three decided to try to increase awareness of the benefits of exercise and nutrition and the importance of living a healthy lifestyle for black women in particular.

The three women named themselves Sisters in Shape and began participating in a number of regional fitness festivals and events, where they would do aerobics demonstrations and then talk to other women, mostly black, about their health and fitness programs and experiences. They came together for annual Philadelphia events such as

Unity Day, Fitness Fest, the City of Hope fitness showcases, smaller health fairs in local churches, and even Power99's radio show *Sistahs*, a program devoted to issues affecting black women's lives. Sisters in Shape was active in the community, but it did not exist as an organization outside these sorts of engagements. Today, almost fifteen years later, Sisters in Shape is one of the most successful health and fitness programs ever developed for black women, with hundreds of longtime members as well as its own gym.

## The Politics of Identity Politics

The fact that the *Philadelphia Daily News* article elicited such a response and that Sisters in Shape continues to resonate so deeply with black women reminds us of the ongoing reality and significance of identity to everyday life and politics. What Sisters in Shape's success tells us about the lasting importance of identity, how the group intervenes in feminist theories of identity politics, and why such interventions open up possibilities for alternative models of identity and thus different types of identity politics—these are the primary questions that anchor *Body Language*. The power of Sisters in Shape—first to draw in so many women and then to build a movement in collaboration with them—speaks to the enduring appeal of identity politics even as the group's self-definitions complicate fixed identity categories such as *black women*.

Throughout *Body Language*, I choose to use the term *identity politics* despite the largely hostile and/or dismissive response it often evokes, both as a descriptive term and as a concept, in our supposedly postidentity era. As has become abundantly clear since the early 1990s, identity politics is not without its problems, foremost among them an essentializing impulse and an investment in a fixed sense of the self. Much critiqued by scholars and media pundits on both the right and the left, identity politics has become what Cressida Heyes calls “a philosophical punching bag” ([2002] 2007), and the fact that critics of varying intellectual persuasions generally fail to offer a specific definition of the term they so easily and vociferously attack only facilitates its easy dismissal (see, e.g., Bickford 1997; Jane Martin 1994; Heyes [2002] 2007; and Kruks 2001 for more extensive discussions of this tendency). For many, identity politics has simply become an outdated term and an outmoded

concern.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, I continue to invoke the term precisely because the women of Sisters in Shape inspire a return to some of the questions that still linger in the shadows of feminist theory and feminist praxis, questions that suggest we may yet find some value in the conceptual and practical underpinnings of identity politics, particularly as they articulate with other theoretical concerns about subjectivity and social change. Along these lines, Susan Bickford's brief overview of some of the most widely circulated meanings of identity politics provides a useful index for understanding the Sisters in Shape women's identity practices: "Identity politics' can refer to articulating a claim in the name of a particular group; being concerned with cultural specificity, particularly in an ethnic-nationalist sense; acting as though group membership necessitates a certain political stance; focusing to an excessive degree on the psychological; and various combinations of these" (1997: 112). Indeed, each of these meanings is particularly apt for Sisters in Shape and its everyday uses of identity.

Feminist theories of identity formation and identity politics emerge out of many different disciplinary locations even as they intersect at various historical and intellectual junctures. Thus, within "feminist theory," the politics of Sisters in Shape may be seen, from one view, as an affirmation of group experience and a celebration of difference; from another view, the group may just as likely be seen as undermining the its liberatory promise through its investment both in a fixed notion of black womanhood and in a stable and coherent self. The possibility of such polarized interpretations of Sisters in Shape's politics attests to the fraught nature of identity in feminist theories and more broadly.

For women of color, lesbians, and postcolonial feminists, a great deal of liberal, radical, and Western feminist theory depends on universalizing and essentializing impulses. Implicit in such critical analyses of Western feminisms—feminist theories attendant to the social and political concerns of middle-class, white, heterosexual women from the North and West—is a desire to expand the collective experiences that generate both "feminist" theory and "feminist" movements. The now-canonized works of feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, the Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, and Maria Lugones, as well as the extensive bodies of literature on critical race theory (e.g., Crenshaw 1991; Crenshaw

et al. 1995; Williams 1991; Matsuda et al. 1993; Matsuda 1996; Guinier and Torres 2002) and intersectional identity (e.g., Anzaldúa 1987; Davis 1981; Moraga 1983; King 1993; Lorde 1984; Collins 1991, 1998; hooks 1990; V. Smith 1998), all offer valid critiques of hegemonic feminisms and celebrate alternative standpoints as fundamental to any feminist theory based in group identity and collective experience, the dominant method by which liberal and radical Western feminists first articulated their own positions. As a health and fitness project specifically of and for black women and as an organization that makes claims for social recognition and justice for those same women, Sisters in Shape clearly benefits from and participates in black women's identity politics.

At the same time, however, these "difference" feminists—including those who theorize more strategic and fluid models of identity (e.g., Anzaldúa 1990a, 1990b; Spivak 1987; Sandoval 2000)—tacitly assume a unified subject.<sup>2</sup> The transcendental subject of these difference-based feminist theories of identity has, of course, been widely deconstructed by theorists positing postmodern and poststructuralist understandings of the self (most notably Derrida [1974] 1997; Foucault [1972] 1982, [1977] 1995, [1981] 1990; Butler 1990, 1993; and those working in their tradition). Michel Foucault's work has been foundational in establishing the idea that both subject formation and one's sense of one's body occur through discursive practices and power and through the structural effects of language on experience.

Elaborating on Foucault in her well-known work on the "discursive limits of sex," Judith Butler (1993) draws on psychoanalytic theory to suggest that subjectivity and identity are materialized through performative language acts. In theorizing the production of gender through a series of ongoing iterations, Butler's performative theory of gender necessarily calls into question the viability of the standpoint theories elaborated by difference feminists precisely because standpoint theory assumes a stable self whereas performance theorists see the self as being continually (re)produced. Postmodern theories of identity and subjectivity like Butler's call attention to Sisters in Shape's explicit investment in the ostensibly stable category of *black women* as potentially naïve and inattentive to the discursive and disciplinary fields through which their subjectivities are constructed and performed. However, just as postmodern and poststructuralist feminists fault difference feminists for their

theoretical commitments to a stable self, difference feminists criticize postmodern theories of identity for the lack of individual agency posited by these radically discursive models of the self.

Even as these largely antithetical theories of identity continue to evolve and their proponents develop finer and finer articulations of their positions, they generally continue to do so in relation to each other. Thus, to try to understand Sisters in Shape's social and political contributions along either of these dominant trajectories is to overlook the complexity the group brings to theoretical discussions of identity and identity politics. *Body Language* instead traces the nuanced and different ways that Sisters in Shape engages in black women's identity politics and, consequently, prompts a reconsideration of feminist identity politics more generally. At the center of the book is an ethnographically based account of the bodily practices and varied discourses through which the Sisters in Shape women construct themselves as a group, articulate and delimit the boundaries of their collective being in relation to prevailing representations of black women, participate in everyday feminist theory making, and rearticulate feminist identity politics. While the Sisters in Shape women's embodied and discursive practices are necessarily constrained by the cultural and material realities of a racist and sexist society—from the controlling images and stereotypes rooted in dominant ideologies to the often inadequate social support, poor housing options, and limited school and work opportunities born of structural inequalities—*Body Language* focuses on the discursive as the site where those realities are interpreted and rearticulated, where the Sisters in Shape women offer their own social and theoretical interventions.

## Sisters in Shape: The Emergence of a Movement

In addition to being a health and exercise project for black women, Sisters in Shape is a community, a culture, and a movement—and the co-construction and intersection of these definitions of the group in and against a complex range of popular and theoretical articulations forms the backbone of this book. Sisters in Shape is, in short, a phenomenally successful black women's health and fitness project. Melanie Marchand, the group's founder and driving force, is one of those people who other people want to be.<sup>3</sup> At times she has been a dancer, a competi-

tive bodybuilder, and a model. She is fiercely intelligent and articulate, completely endearing, and down-to-earth, with an easy, hearty laugh and an occasional giggle. She gets a lot done in a day and does it with integrity and style. When I first met her, she was spending her days as one of two marketing directors for Air Products, Inc. (a manufacturer of gases and chemicals for art, medical, food, and industrial applications), a position that combined her backgrounds in chemical engineering and business administration. Late in the evenings and early in the mornings, Melanie did her own weight training, taught aerobics and other fitness classes, and trained clients. Squeezed into and between work, fitness, and fitness work (teaching and training others) were her other engagements, most of them reflective of her commitments to encouraging and mentoring other African Americans in the various communities of which she is a part—representing her company at professional meetings like that of the National Society of Black Engineers, for instance, or choreographing pieces for the annual show at the W.E.B. Du Bois College House at the University of Pennsylvania while she was working on her master's in business administration at Penn's Wharton School.

In the late 1980s, when Melanie began teaching aerobics in Philadelphia—both at the University of Pennsylvania and at gyms throughout the city—she noticed that the small number of black women in her classes was highly disproportionate to the city's, and even the university's, demographics. Talking with other black fitness instructors in the city, she learned that black women were largely absent from their classes as well, a finding supported by research on physical activity and exercise among women of color. The Centers for Disease Control, for instance, has found that fewer than 30 percent of women of color in the United States get enough physical activity to derive health benefits (cited in Henderson and Ainsworth 2001; see also Wells 1996 and Young et al. 1998). Thus, although black women have had a longtime presence in women's athletics (see, e.g., Cahn 1994; Vertinsky and Captain 1998; Captain 1991; Gissendanner 1994; Y. Smith 1992; Lansbury 2001; and Dumas 2004) and are among the most iconic female athletes, a relatively small percentage of black women participate in noncompetitive exercise and fitness.

The local picture began to change with the *Philadelphia Daily News* article. The organizational story of how Sisters in Shape grew from an

initial group of three committed fitness enthusiasts into its current configuration as one of the most successful health and fitness programs ever developed for black women is a testament to Melanie's vision as well as to many other women's overwhelming desire for information and change where health and their bodies are concerned. When the calls started streaming in to the Sisters in Shape voicemail box, Melanie wanted to respond to each and every woman even though she realized the virtual impossibility of such a task. Instead, she decided the best strategy would be to hold a free Sisters in Shape health and fitness symposium. The resulting Sunday afternoon event was designed to address black women's health from an integrated perspective: two medical doctors discussed black women's poor health statistics and the ways that exercise and balanced nutrition might help redress some of those health conditions, an herbalist talked about alternative treatments and herbal supplements, an exercise scientist commented on the overall benefits of exercise and fitness, a spiritual consultant offered insight into the relationship between bodily well-being and spiritual health, and a motivational speaker helped structure the whole event and encouraged women to commit to making major lifestyle changes.

## A Different Kind of "Strong Black Woman"

At the symposium, Melanie called attention to—and dismissed—some of the culturally specific excuses black women use to rationalize their lack of exercise. "Do not tell me that you spent too much money having your hair straightened and sweat will ruin it," she scolded. "Do not tell me you can't afford to join a gym or to work with a personal trainer when you're spending hundreds of dollars a week having your hair and nails done," she added. (Sisters in Shape has always operated on a sliding scale and even secured special Sisters in Shape rates from its original sponsor, 12th Street Gym.) "Do not tell me that your man likes you big," she continued. "Do not tell me that greens have to be cooked with a fat ham hock to taste good." The women in the audience laughed knowingly, nodded enthusiastically, and seemed to take a certain pleasure in being called out. More than an admonishment, Melanie's good-natured dismissal of these excuses helped create the sense that Sisters in Shape was, indeed, a health and fitness project devoted specifically

to black women and their needs, and the almost two hundred women present got the message.

Once the laughter subsided, Melanie tackled one of the biggest obstacles to black women's widespread participation in exercise programs: taking (or making) the time to prioritize themselves. While competing demands on one's time and attention affect women of all races and ethnicities, the cultural power of the myth of the strong black woman compounds this problem for black women. Unlike dominant stereotypical representations of black women as mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels,<sup>4</sup> the image of the strong black woman has been positively accepted within black communities and fetishized by the larger society. And yet, as black feminist critics have pointed out, the idea of the strong black woman is a complex one that recognizes historical legacies of survival and resistance while also creating impossible standards for everyday life (see, e.g., Wallace [1978] 1990; Gillespie [1978] 1984; Harris 1995, 2001; Harris-Lacewell 2001; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2005, 2007, 2009; Romero 2000; C. Thompson 2000; Dorsey 2002; Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight 2004; Woods-Giscombé 2010). Further, the image is often naturalized and internalized among black women such that they measure themselves against an ideal of superhuman capabilities—the ability to care for everyone, to hold everything together, to solve everyone's problems. Obviously, the strong black woman does not have much time for herself; nor—as the myth would have it—does she need much time. As a result, many black women express concerns over being perceived as selfish or “unduly focused on the self” if they limit their roles as extensive physical and emotional caretakers and problem solvers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007: 41).

With an intimate understanding of such concerns, Melanie emphasized the fact that taking care of other people requires taking care of oneself first. Over time, this has become one of Sisters in Shape's central tenets, and it speaks to the physical and emotional consequences of trying to live the myth of the strong black woman. As sociologist Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant has demonstrated, the myth of the strong black woman has serious implications for black women's physical and emotional health (2005, 2007, 2009). Through her interviews, Beauboeuf-Lafontant found that many women sought to hide or “internalize” their “strength-discrepant realities and feelings,” and this “internalization

took form in behaviors, including overindulging in eating, shopping, and drinking, as well as in physical and mental distress, namely, hypertension, heart disease, stomach ills, respiratory difficulties, and depressive episodes, often referred to as nervous breakdowns” (2007: 36). Recognizing the power of such expectations and controlling images, Melanie explicitly gave the women present permission to care for themselves as a fundamental way of caring for others. In so doing, she also demonstrated that Sisters in Shape understands and embraces the nuanced and particular complexities of black women’s relationships to others as well as to the material realities that constrain their exercise practices and their attention to themselves.

Even more, Sisters in Shape transforms the strong black woman from a controlling discourse to a physical incarnation, thus providing an alternative way for women to hold on to the positive, resistant aspects of the image. That is, Melanie’s heavily muscled body continues to represent the value of strength but in a way that contests the unreasonable expectations implicit in the myth of the black superwoman while also consolidating Sisters in Shape’s prioritization of the self. Within this context, the black woman’s strong body insists on being seen, and this demand for recognition—of not only the body but also the self—is a critical rearticulation of a controlling image and dangerous myth. As gender and sports scholar Leslie Heywood has argued in her work on female bodybuilders, the “sovereignty inherent in bodybuilding” (1998: 170) and the ways it “recuperates to-be-looked-at-ness” (159) disturb dominant gender ideologies and unsettle long-standing assumptions about women’s subjectivity: “Women’s bodybuilding is an unequivocal self-expression, an indication of women’s right to *be*, not for children, partners, fellow activists, not for anyone else” (171). While Sisters in Shape is not exactly a women’s bodybuilding organization, the women’s muscled bodies similarly represent a mode of cultural activism and open up new ways of imagining the strong black woman.

## Building a Movement, Creating a Community

While it is obvious that Melanie is a symbol of strength, a committed fitness role model, and a charismatic leader with a contagious and inspirational energy, it is equally clear that Sisters in Shape is unique as

a health and fitness project for black women because of its broad grassroots appeal and collective sense of ownership. In the first few months following the symposium, Sisters in Shape began offering monthly educational workshops—covering such topics as the benefits of weight training, how to work aerobic exercise into a daily schedule, and the use of nutrition to boost metabolism—as well as group exercise events such as weekly power walks along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive (the West River Drive) and Cardio-Funk step aerobics classes. Meeting in these contexts helped solidify a feeling of community among the first women to join Sisters in Shape, and it is actually many of these women who built an organization out of a service. Typical of this early transformation, the first Sisters in Shape aerobics demonstration after the symposium involved not just Melanie and Kathy (Carethia had already left the group to devote more time to her own fitness career) but also half a dozen other Sisters in Shape members at varying stages of meeting their fitness goals. In the true spirit of a grassroots organization, Sisters in Shape continued to grow according to the interests and skills of its earliest members: one added a monthly newsletter, another helped with a web page, and a third began circulating recipes for nutritionally balanced traditional foods.

As many different women participated in the slow transformation of Sisters in Shape into a community and not just a fitness program, Melanie also gave herself over to the incredible demand. Within days of the symposium, she left her lucrative corporate job (opting, instead, to work as a part-time contractor for the same company) so she could devote herself to developing Sisters in Shape (itself a full-time job, especially after Kathy's departure a few months later). Within a year, Melanie had quit even her contract work. Sisters in Shape became her only job and the focus of all her time, energy, and marketing savvy.

Now, more than ten years later, in addition to its slate of ongoing classes, Sisters in Shape produces an annual Health and Fitness Explosion, a daylong program of exercise and education that attracts more than five hundred women. Smaller subsets of the group—the “core members”—also appear as fairly regular guest fitness experts on a local television morning show, where they demonstrate various aerobic exercises, weight-lifting techniques, and stretches. Melanie has also collaborated with the Einstein Heart Institute to offer free satellite versions of

Sisters in Shape in Germantown, an outlying neighborhood of Philadelphia. This twelve-week program was the most popular health education program ever sponsored by the Einstein Medical Centers,<sup>5</sup> and many of the participants later joined Sisters in Shape. Most important, however, is Melanie's new Sisters in Shape gym, a physical space that continues to cultivate the sense of community at the center of the organization.

## Coming Together as a Real Community

Sisters in Shape engages women collectively as well as individually, and thus it is both a real community and an imagined one. The real community is a face-to-face one, a group of women who come together at different times for different reasons: to celebrate and affirm, to empower and discuss, and to practice and share the lifestyle choices they have made through the Sisters in Shape philosophy. They come together to exercise, to eat, and to talk; they meet for Sisters in Shape events and for movies, sports, shopping, and even vacations. They are a community of women and a community of friends, and this—together with the strength of the Sisters in Shape imagined community—is what distinguishes them from other weight-loss programs and from other twelve-step groups.

Sisters in Shape really began in earnest with the 1998 *Philadelphia Daily News* article and the subsequent health and fitness symposium, and to this day the annual Sisters in Shape Health and Fitness Explosion continues to provide the same community outreach and energy. The Health and Fitness Explosion also offers the best overarching structure for describing what Sisters in Shape does as an organization. This daylong event attracts approximately five hundred to six hundred women, almost all of whom are black. The event, with fees of \$50 to \$70 (which includes a new pair of Nike aerobics shoes for the first hundred women who register), consists of six breakout sessions, half devoted to different types of exercise (both aerobic and anaerobic) and half devoted to health, nutrition, and “empowerment” education (including such topics as self-esteem, spirituality, and stress reduction). In addition, there are usually two plenary sessions, one that addresses different aspects of black women's disproportionately poor health statistics in this country and one that varies according to the speaker's area of expertise. In the past, plenary speakers have included doctors, entertainers, writ-

ers, and motivational speakers. At noon, all participants come together for a luncheon at which the Sisters in Shape core members share their stories, offer aerobics demonstrations, and honor “the most inspirational” Sisters in Shape member of the year. Also on hand are wellness practitioners (including Western biomedical doctors, psychotherapists, massage therapists, chiropractors, and alternative healers) and a handful of vendors selling African and African-inspired clothing; self-help and other empowerment books and publications; and handmade soaps, lotions, and oils. The event is festive, and the participants are generally overwhelmingly energetic despite having spent hours in multiple exercise classes that may have included African dance, belly dancing, Brazilian samba, kickboxing, funk- or hip-hop-inspired aerobics, yoga, and Pilates.

All of this runs smoothly thanks to the Sisters in Shape core members, who set up and decorate the group’s designated space at the Philadelphia Convention Center, help register participants in the morning, move women along to the proper breakout rooms, coordinate the luncheon, offer information, sell T-shirts and memberships, and share their own personal histories with women who may be curious about making similar lifestyle changes. The Sisters in Shape core members are living models for the program. Many have been members since the beginning. Some have lost more than a hundred pounds of fat and replaced some of that weight with muscle; some have dropped in dress size from 18 or 20 or 24 to 8 or 10 or 12. They have slowly lost inches upon inches and kept them off for five, six, seven, and even ten years. Many have lowered their blood pressure and cholesterol levels dramatically; others have had major surgeries such as double hip replacement and come back to exercise with the group within the year. Their stories are a fundamental part of the Sisters in Shape organizational narrative, and the annual Health and Fitness Explosion is just one of many opportunities to (re)construct and narrate the group’s history.

While the Health and Fitness Explosion is the most visible, public way in which Sisters in Shape comes together as a physical community, the Sisters in Shape women create and sustain their community through face-to-face interactions in many other contexts as well. Early on, when Sisters in Shape was just forming, members met below the Philadelphia Museum of Art before heading off to walk Martin Luther

King Jr. Drive together. In addition to providing obvious health benefits, these walks helped cement many of the social relationships and friendships that characterize Sisters in Shape today, drawing women together for exercise, support, and companionship. At the time, Sisters in Shape was working in collaboration with 12th Street Gym, where Melanie taught a number of aerobics classes, and her classes, in particular, offered another opportunity for Sisters in Shape members to build community.

Many of Melanie's Cardio-Funk step aerobics classes were well known to everyone who used the gym because of the involvement of the Sisters in Shape women who took them, congregating on one side of the room and encouraging each other as well as everyone else in the class with their call-and-response-style interactions with Melanie. In this windowless room, their energy seemed to reverberate off the walls, increasing the noise level to the point where the class was likely heard in the basketball court one floor down; their energy was contagious, and even in the midst of the hardest set of lunges, I could not repress a smile as the Sisters in Shape women counted off the lunges with Melanie. I have never been in an aerobics class anywhere—San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, Southern California, Salt Lake City, or Philadelphia (including other classes taught by Melanie)—where participants have been so enthusiastically engaged with the instructor, the class, and the other members.

Today, Sisters in Shape has its own gym, and many of those early Cardio-Funk class regulars work there part-time, for the social and community benefits as well as for the extra income. The new Sisters in Shape gym extends and expands the community-based spirit of the early aerobics classes. Not only do Sisters in Shape members work at the new gym; they also have the opportunity to take many more classes together. In this way, the physical space of their own gym fosters a greater sense of real, lived community as there are many more options for group exercise. At 12th Street Gym, Melanie's classes slowly became Sisters in Shape classes, but there were always Sisters in Shape members whose schedules prevented them from attending those specific group classes; instead, they chose individual ways of getting their cardiovascular workouts (interestingly, they rarely took other instructors' aerobics classes if they could not make the Sisters in Shape classes with Melanie). Now,

however, Sisters in Shape members have tremendous flexibility in terms of taking classes with other Sisters in Shape members. Without question, the new gym functions as a community center for the women of Sisters in Shape, a physical site where they can meet to exercise, to talk, or simply to hang out with each other—a powerful new social institution where they can see themselves reflected back in the bodies and the language of the others around them.<sup>6</sup>

Even before Sisters in Shape opened its own gym, Melanie helped create an environment and a schedule that distinguished Sisters in Shape from the general atmosphere of 12th Street Gym. For instance, on Saturday mornings, Sisters in Shape members had their own special ninety-minute exercise class, the genre of which changed from week to week. Guest instructors taught activities as varied as Brazilian samba, kickboxing, belly dancing, yoga, African dance, and Pilates, and the Sisters in Shape women shimmied and kicked and rolled their bellies with good humor and incredible energy. For many, these classes set the mood for the rest of the day, which became a scaled-down version of the annual Health and Fitness Explosions. After the special Sisters in Shape class, many women either took a break to get something to eat or lifted weights or just hung out with friends until it was time for Melanie's ninety-minute Cardio-Funk step aerobics class. From there, they went to Melanie's sixty-minute Final Cut class, a group weight-lifting class, and then they sometimes grabbed another quick bite before reconvening for an afternoon rap session with other Sisters in Shape members. These sessions addressed topics such as blood health and cholesterol concerns, cooking for family gatherings, keeping fit while injured, and eating while on vacation. Many of the Sisters in Shape members spent all of Saturday in the gym, going from one class to another with only short breaks to eat and to chat with friends and fellow members. Of course, not all members participated in all classes, and attendance varied from week to week, but usually between fifteen and twenty-five Sisters in Shape members were present throughout the day. Thus, by the end of any given Saturday, the women of Sisters in Shape had successfully reaffirmed and reestablished their community in the midst of a downtown Philadelphia gym.

During the week, Sisters in Shape members tended toward more individual workout schedules and gym routines, though Melanie's

midweek classes at 12th Street Gym were always considered Sisters in Shape events by the members. Now that Sisters in Shape has its own gym, every day is much more like Saturday at 12th Street Gym, though a bit toned down. Most women do not have the time (or the strength and stamina) to take every single class, attend every rap session, and hang out at the gym with other Sisters in Shape women, but because this is their space, the overall tenor captures the spirit and energy of those early Saturdays at 12th Street Gym.

In addition to taking classes, talking through the Sisters in Shape philosophy, and working and playing together, the Sisters in Shape women also offer classes and fitness demonstrations for audiences at local events, at health fairs, and even on morning television shows. They have been featured in national magazines such as *Heart and Soul* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. For these demonstrations and publicity events, they not only practice specific aerobic routines and exercises but also coordinate costumes and help each other with hair and makeup in ways that foster an even deeper sense of group identity.

This structure—the group classes, the rap sessions, the socializing, the team demonstrations, and now the Sisters in Shape gym—distinguishes Sisters in Shape from other group weight-loss programs such as Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers as well as from other support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. While these other programs and groups often have their own spaces, meet regularly, and share beliefs and practices, they tend to be organized predominantly for daily support and for education (at least insofar as this furthers the support paradigm) but rarely for socializing beyond the immediate group meeting (more traditional twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous are something of an exception because of the mentor model at their core, but again, most of those relationships are devoted to supporting recovery from addiction). Sisters in Shape goes far beyond a support paradigm, though the group structure certainly makes lifestyle changes easier to incorporate in a lasting way. In keeping with the group's tendency to reorient dominant discourses, Sisters in Shape prioritizes overall health and social empowerment in ways that tend to remove “weight loss” from the group's explicit goals; as a result, institutional “support” as an explicit discursive focus tends to recede, becoming a secondary concern.